

YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

A REGIONAL TRANSIT SYSTEM FOR SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Introduction

Each workday, approximately 25,000 people, most in single occupancy vehicles, converge on Santa Barbara County's South Coast from points both north and south. With as many as 15,000 of these commuters traveling to and from Ventura County, the congestion on the narrow band of Highway 101 between Montecito and Carpinteria is a transportation planner's nightmare. Ongoing efforts among the many disparate groups involved to reach consensus on a solution to this bottleneck have so far resulted in an impasse.

From the other direction, more than 10,000 people living in the North County— primarily from the main population centers of Santa Maria, Lompoc and the Santa Ynez Valley— commute to the South County. Thousands more commute between North County communities. This is the fastest growing area of the County. Transportation issues must be addressed both comprehensively and early to avoid the congestion and periodic gridlock currently experienced in the South. There is some commuter based intercommunity transit for the area, specifically the Clean Air Express, Valley Express and The Breeze Bus. However, for those needing to travel during non-commute hours, there may not be any alternative to the private vehicle. And for the transit dependent population without a private vehicle, there may not be any realistic option.

The Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) is the regional planning agency responsible for the distribution of local, state and federal transportation funds. Comprised of city and county elected officials, SBCAG is also the agency responsible for addressing regional transportation issues. SBCAG can facilitate and promote a structure for a regional transit service among North County communities and between the North and South County. A regional transit system may be only a partial solution to Santa Barbara County's transportation woes, but it is one that could be implemented relatively quickly.

Investigation

The Grand Jury spoke with the director of SBCAG on several occasions. Jury members also interviewed representatives from the Ventura County Transportation Commission and the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments, as well as transit system representatives from Santa Barbara and Santa Maria. The Jury reviewed various documents and attended transportation planning meetings.

Observations

Intercommunity commuter transit service is provided by the Clean Air Express, Valley Express and The Breeze. In the North County, fixed route transit services are offered by six different operators: Community of Lompoc Transit (COLT), Santa Maria Area Transit (SMAT), Los Alamos Transit, Santa Ynez Valley Transit, Cuyama Transit and Guadalupe Flyer. Appendix A provides a summary of the services offered.

Presently, there is no master plan for the integration of these transit services. A plan for integration would include, at minimum, coordination and cooperation between the services with respect to routes, scheduling, and transfers between carriers. Transfers require a centralized method of allocating fares among the various operators. The Grand Jury found four major impediments to integration. These are inadequate funding, weak ridership, a reluctance to embrace a regional outlook, and the lack of a master plan.

Funding

There are three primary sources of transportation funding. These are state, federal, and Measure D funds. State funding has become unreliable and, along with federal funding, is expected to decrease in the future. Measure D funds come from a one-half cent increase in sales tax approved by Santa Barbara County voters in 1989. SBCAG administers all aspects of the Measure D program. The funds are intended for a variety of local and regional transportation projects. Communities also have the option of spending their local Measure D funds on roads. North County communities rely heavily on these funds for road maintenance, spending the majority of their Measure D yearly for this purpose. In the South County, local Measure D funds are used primarily for transit.

Measure D funding will expire in 2009. SBCAG is currently preparing a ballot measure, targeted for the November 2006 general election, authorizing the extension of Measure D. Santa Barbara County residents should understand how the loss of this local, stable revenue source will impact transportation infrastructure projects and programs. For example, Clean Air Express depends on Measure D funds.

Ridership

Dependence on cars has kept bus ridership low. However, as gas prices rise, commuters are showing more interest in transit and bus usage is generally increasing. The transit service with the largest increase is the Coastal Express which connects Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. In its two years of operation, the number of passengers has nearly doubled from 46,300 to 91,000 a year. This demonstrates the potential of bus transit in a clogged commuter corridor.

Transit providers are reluctant to establish new routes because of the federal Transportation Development Act (TDA) requirement that 20% of their operating revenue

come from fares.¹ More innovative approaches could increase the number of riders. For example, some employers have offered incentives such as alternate work schedules, emergency rides home, partial fare reimbursement and extra vacation days to promote the use of transit. Clean Air Express has eliminated its subscription service which required that a rider purchase a seat for a month. This limited the number of seats that could be sold. If the rider did not take the bus on a particular day, his or her seat remained empty. While still selling multiple ride passes, the Clean Air Express now operates on a first-come, first-served basis. In San Luis Obispo County, commuters have access to park-and-ride lots and the ability to transfer between regional and city buses. In Ventura County, transfers between Vista, the intercommunity transit line operated by the Ventura County Transportation Commission, and local bus lines are facilitated by a pre-paid SmartCard and an on-line routing system. A very successful marketing campaign has also contributed to increased ridership in Ventura County.

Local Control vs. Regionalism

In the South County, one transit provider, Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD), provides service for most of the area. This is not the case in the North County where there are several providers and where, historically, there has been a lack of cooperation among the various cities concerning their transit routes. This primarily results from the understandable desire to maintain local control of local transportation dollars.

However, a good start in establishing an intercommunity transit system within Santa Barbara County began on May 9, 2005. The new North County Intercommunity Transit Service is a partnership arrangement between North County operators and SBCAG. It offers both commuter and general use bus service between Santa Maria, Vandenberg Air Force Base and Lompoc on The Breeze Bus. This includes free transfers to local service on SMAT in Santa Maria and on COLT in Lompoc. The Breeze may signal a more cooperative regional vision.

Master Plan

To date, intercommunity transit planning has been piecemeal. If bus usage is to increase, there needs to be flexibility in scheduling for all riders. Critical to creating that flexibility are coordinated schedules among transit providers and transfer points. Although The Breeze is one step to intercommunity planning, additional connections between The Breeze and the Valley Express would make it possible to travel throughout the County. This would not only allow workers to travel to their jobs in the Santa Barbara area, it would also allow shoppers, university students, and individuals needing medical care to travel to the South Coast at an affordable cost.

One agency, either SBCAG or a Joint Powers Authority created from all transit operators, could provide the required coordination. An integrated planning and operating authority is especially critical in the North County where population is growing rapidly and several transit operators are providing localized service. A successful model for a North County

¹ The required rate is only 10% in rural areas. Also, receipts can be supplemented with Measure D funds to meet the minimum required by the TDA.

regional transit system already exists, although in somewhat differing forms, in both Ventura and San Luis Obispo Counties.

Conclusion

Santa Barbara County needs a regional transit system. Transportation issues in Santa Barbara County negatively affect tens of thousands of County citizens on a daily basis. The problem with so many single occupancy vehicles commuting to and from the same general locations is obvious. Fuel is wasted, roads are congested, air quality is compromised, and people lose time and money commuting. Furthermore, there are transit dependent populations in the North County with few available options for traveling between communities for work, medical services, shopping or other needs. A bus transit system is one solution that can be implemented in a relatively short amount of time. The Breeze is evidence that regional cooperation, if expanded, could result in a transit system that would encompass the entire county. San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties have forged wide regional systems and marketed them well enough so that ridership supports them. It is time for SBCAG and County officials to assert their leadership by supporting and implementing the creation of a county-wide transit system. Regional transit within North County and from North to South County is the first step in solving the County's transit problems.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1

Santa Barbara County lacks an integrated regional transit system.

Recommendation 1

The Santa Barbara County Association of Governments should act immediately to implement an integrated regional transit system. This can be done through a Joint Powers Agreement establishing a Joint Powers Authority among County transit operators or by contracting directly for connector transit services among communities.

Affected Agencies

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments

Finding	1
Recommendation	1

Appendix A

- Clean Air Express
Operated by SBCAG, the Clean Air Express makes six weekday commuter bus trips between Lompoc and the South Coast and four between Santa Maria and the South. Two of those routes were added in 2004, resulting in a 38% increase in ridership, and another will be added in July 2005.
- Valley Express
Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (SBMTD) inaugurated this service in March 2005. There are four bus routes with stops in Solvang and Buellton. This is a 3-year pilot program.
- The Breeze Bus
A North County intercommunity transit service began in May 2005. Three buses carry passengers between Santa Maria, Vandenberg Air Force Base, and Lompoc. This is also a 3-year pilot program.
- COLT
In addition to local fixed route, City of Lompoc Transit offers twice weekly transportation between Lompoc and Santa Barbara for medical and general use.
- Cuyama Transit
Cuyama Transit provides twice weekly van service from Cuyama to Santa Maria, Taft and Bakersfield.
- Guadalupe Flyer
The Guadalupe Flyer provides regular weekday service between Guadalupe and Santa Maria.
- Los Alamos Transit. This pilot program offers two trips two days a week to Santa Maria.
- Santa Ynez Valley Transit
This bus service operates between Santa Ynez, Buellton and Solvang.
- SMAT
Santa Maria Area Transit serves Santa Maria, Orcutt and Tanglewood. As part of the North County Intercommunity Transit Service, it also operates The Breeze.