

The VTA priority: BART — and everything else will have to wait

[By Gary Richards](#)
[Bay Area News Group](#)

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Meeting for the first time since Santa Clara County voters gave a thumbs up to bringing BART to the South Bay, the Valley Transportation Authority on Thursday began mapping out future spending plans. The priority: BART, BART and BART.

That means, with sales tax revenues shriveling in the wounded economy, everything else — from express bus routes to electrifying Caltrain to extending light rail — likely will have to wait.

"Given that voters have endorsed BART not once, but twice," VTA General Manager Michael Burns said, "from the staff's perspective the priority is clear and that priority is BART."

The agency held a 2 1/2 hour workshop and, while no formal action was taken, it set the stage for critical decisions that will be made early next year. While the VTA hopes to land money for downtown BART stations in a federal stimulus package, it isn't clear there will be more federal help for other projects.

Bottom line: There's not enough cash to build the \$6.1 billion BART extension along with the more than a dozen projects approved by voters eight years ago. That half-cent sales tax may produce \$2 billion less than originally forecast, and there's more worrisome financial news.

VTA sales tax revenues fell \$6 million from July through September. The one-eighth of a cent tax approved in Measure B last month can only be used to pay for BART operations, not building new train lines or expanding bus routes.

And, the VTA is spending \$60 million of \$150 million it takes in annually from the 2000 tax to cover operating costs and bond debt of the current transit system, leaving even fewer dollars to pay for BART and other projects.

Choices will have to be made and from Burns' view, there's only one choice.

"It's clear we can't see the BART project getting (\$750 million in federal) money if we're

spending our local money on other projects," Burns said in an interview earlier this week. "That just doesn't add up."

That means everything else could be in question unless other sources of money are found.

- Electrification of Caltrain: On hold until the impact of running high-speed rail along the Caltrain corridor is known.
- Light rail expansion to Eastridge and Vasona: May depend on federal stimulus.
- A people mover to the airport: Depends on private funds the city of San Jose will seek.
- Express buses along Alum Rock Road and Santa Clara Street: Depends on bond money promised by the state, but California's growing deficit makes any state funds questionable.

The board often squabbled last year as the BART tax headed to the ballot, with some board members pushing projects other than BART. Some of that was evident Thursday. David Casas of Los Altos wanted funds available to maintain existing bus and light rail service. Board Member Yoriko Kishimoto of Palo Alto didn't want Caltrain shorted. And David Cortese of San Jose wanted light rail to Eastridge to remain an option.

But Dolly Sandoval of Cupertino, who will chair the board next year, said it's time to stop bickering and move on and get behind BART.

"It is incumbent that once the board makes a decision, that is the train we are getting on and that is what we are riding to the station," she said. "If we are going to max federal stimulus dollars or our own local dollars, we've got to make sure we are singing from the same hymn book."

In February, the VTA will release a new cost estimate for the 16-mile BART extension from Fremont to the South Bay. Then in June it will approve a new budget, one that the agency says will focus on money for BART and whatever else is left over.