



Editorial: It's time for BART to rethink the Oakland Airport connector

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BART DIRECTORS NEED to consider alternatives before approving financing for a light-rail system between the Coliseum station and the Oakland Airport.

For years now, BART officials have fantasized about a people-mover that would transport riders along the 3.2-mile trip. Rather than the existing AirBART bus service, riders would board an elevated light-rail system.

Originally forecast to cost \$130 million in 2000, the price tag has escalated to more than \$500 million. Meanwhile, just-released daily ridership projections for the system, once forecast at 13,540 by 2020, have now shrunk to 4,670 by the end of the next decade. And the projected round-trip fare has jumped from \$4 to \$12 per person.

Last year, district officials had visions of a public-private partnership to finance the deal. That idea dissolved when three groups of private companies bailed out, apparently realizing the project had too much financial risk and not enough potential upside. Six months ago, the light-rail project seemed nearly dead.

But the prospect of \$70 million of federal stimulus dollars breathed new life into the project. District officials are now talking about financing the airport rail link on their own. The plan now calls for seeking bids from private companies to design, build, operate and maintain it. That's a recognition

that the private sector can often operate cheaper than the public sector.

The problem is that, even with all the funding the district has lined up, it's still about \$93 million to \$123 million short of what it needs to build the system.

Today, district directors will decide whether to seek \$150 million of federal loans to bridge the gap and have some cushion. Before they take on that debt, they should consider the consequences and the alternatives.

For even if the district manages to build the system, it's own projections show that it will lose millions of dollars in the future on operations and won't turn a consistent profit until 2036.

That means that the taxpayers and riders of the rest of the system will be left to subsidize the airport link.

In the past, we have been supportive of the airport linkage. But the new financial and ridership projections have made us rethink our position.

It's not surprising that the ridership projections for the airport link have plummeted. Air travel has been hard hit by the economic downturn and soaring fuel prices. Oakland Airport also has been hurt badly because some key carriers have moved more service across the Bay to the San Francisco Airport. The number of Oakland passengers this year will be only about two-thirds the total in 2005.

Fewer airport passengers means fewer people to ride the link from the Coliseum to the terminal. Projections prepared for BART show it could be a decade or more before the airport recovers to the levels of just a few years ago. And, looking to the future, the state's plans for high-speed rail between

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Northern and Southern California will certainly cut into airport traffic. We also believe that the projected \$12 round-trip fare will discourage more passengers than BART thinks from using the connector.

In an ideal world, it would be great to have a fancy rail system to move passengers from their flights to BART. It would be great to mirror the service across the Bay at SFO. But the San Francisco Airport carries 64 percent of the region's air passengers, while Oakland serves just 20 percent.

So, even though BART has some federal stimulus money to help pay for the light-rail system, spending it to build a money-losing entity that will create more operating debt for the district in the future makes little sense. The stimulus money could probably be better spent on other Bay Area transportation projects.

Meanwhile, BART has a much cheaper alternative — improved bus service — to shuttle passengers from the Coliseum station to the airport terminal. It's time to put the brakes on the light-rail plan and look at other solutions.

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