

## Daniel Borenstein: BART plan for Oakland Airport is folly

MediaNews columnist

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I took a week off overlapping the Memorial Day weekend to go to a family wedding on the East Coast. The night before my flight, I wrestled with how I was going to get to Oakland International Airport.

Should I drive or ride BART?

My research left me more convinced than ever that BART's plan to spend more than half a billion dollars on a 3.2-mile light-rail link from the Coliseum station into the airport is total folly — a colossal waste of precious federal stimulus dollars that could be better spent on much-needed transit improvements elsewhere in the Bay Area.

By BART's own projections, the rail link is a financial loser. Revenues won't cover expenses for nearly 30 years. Meanwhile, there's already a perfectly adequate bus line that connects BART with the airport.

Let's face it: The rail line will serve only those who are wealthy enough to be able to afford air travel. Shouldn't we first be spending transit dollars to help everyone get to work, buy groceries or see a doctor? Shouldn't we first be investing in systems that serve the basic needs of our residents and attract high volumes of riders?

Instead, BART is moving forward with plans to build a rail line for a select few. This is one of those ideas that BART officials dreamed up and seem hell bent on building no matter what the facts.

Never mind that ridership, once forecast at 13,540 by 2020, is now projected to reach only 4,670 by then. Never mind that the expected round-trip fare has increased from \$4 to \$12 per person. Never mind that BART will have to borrow \$150 million from the federal government to help fund the project — money that it will take decades to repay.

Never mind that the link will cost more than the entire construction of the fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel — a project that will benefit roughly six times as many people each day.

We have grumbled for years that the BART link to San Francisco International Airport hasn't lived up to original ridership expectations. Almost certainly, we'll be voicing the same complaints, or worse, about the Oakland airport rail link when, or if, it opens in 2013. And, based on my experience last week, it's not hard to see why.

For starters, consider the cost. Riding BART from Pleasant Hill, the station closest to my house, to the Coliseum station, would have cost me \$6.80 round trip, plus \$6 more for the shuttle bus into the airport. Parking at the BART station would have cost me \$5 a day. Total cost for the week if I took BART: About \$48.

Instead, I went on the Internet and found that, using my AAA membership discount, I could park at one of the remote lots near the airport for \$4.95 a day. The total bill was about \$35. Sure, there was the cost of gas and running my car from Central Contra Costa County to Oakland. But, frankly, it was a lot easier — and quicker — than taking BART.

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And, adding a fancy rail line from the Coliseum station to the airport would not have changed my mental calculation, especially when you consider that it will cost \$6 more than the existing bus shuttle charge.

Right now, there's plenty of parking at Oakland most of the time. Why should I hop on BART when it's more expensive? Moreover, why should we invest in a fancy rail link when a shuttle bus is more than adequate at a fraction of the cost?

Perhaps a BART extension was justified for the much larger San Francisco airport, but the Oakland link certainly doesn't make financial sense.

Especially not when airlines are migrating to the west side of the Bay and the state is planning high-speed trains that will further reduce demand for air travel from Oakland.

The good news is that the Oakland airport rail link is not yet a done deal. BART directors are now seeking proposals to build and operate the line. They have until Nov. 30 to pick a contractor or give the money back so the Metropolitan Transportation Commission can redirect the funds.

I say, give it back, so the dollars can be spent on a needed and useful transit project.

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