

BART measure needs to go on ballot

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After nearly two years of planning and public outreach in communities throughout Santa Clara County, the Valley Transportation Authority is ready to put a new funding measure on the November ballot. The plan on Thursday's agenda is for a half-cent sales tax increase to fill potholes, resolve traffic chokepoints and, yes, finally finish the BART line from Berryessa all the way to Santa Clara.

It's time. Go for it. Delaying these kinds of projects only means higher costs. And fixing crumbling streets and highway bottlenecks -- we needed that done yesterday.

Public meetings and conversations with city leaders have led to a balanced spending plan, including in parts of the county that have felt shortchanged in the past. It includes transit along Highway 85 and major improvements to county expressways like Lawrence and San Tomas. Meanwhile, VTA is working on a better plan to serve low-income communities than the mostly empty buses that run now.

A surprise glitch with the site planned for Santa Clara's BART station has surfaced, but it is surmountable.

Two weeks ago, Nathan Donato-Weinstein reported in the Silicon Valley Business Journal that Apple had signed a 10-year lease for land where the Santa Clara BART station is planned. VTA didn't know. And while Apple had pulled \$20 million in permits from the Santa Clara planning department, nobody told Mayor Lisa Gillmor or the council.

Conspiracy theories erupted, on the assumption that Santa Clara was being cut from the BART plan. But nobody in their right mind would want that. The considerable space needed for a train yard and parking is in Santa Clara, not downtown San Jose.

VTA can't buy the station site because the owner doesn't want to sell, and the agency can't use eminent domain until federal officials sign off on the final leg of BART -- after the fall measure passes. It's a mess.

But talks are underway with Apple. Given the support for BART by companies in the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which includes Apple, we're confident this can be resolved.

Santa Clara County Supervisor and VTA Board Chair Cindy Chavez says no previous transportation measure has included this much public outreach. Nor have the costs ever been so independently vetted. She's confident the measure can deliver what's promised, all the way to Santa Clara.

VTA had a bad turn with Bus Rapid Transit construction on Alum Rock Avenue. But its road projects have gone well, and it has aced BART, bringing in the Berryessa line ahead of schedule and under budget.

This plan will improve traffic flow, even without luring the masses to ride transit, by dealing with spots where bottlenecks occur. And with Caltrain electrification coming soon, the plan can complete commuter rail ringing the Bay.

Put it before voters.