

## Step in the right direction

Column by Tim Hunt  
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TRAFFIC will get worse before it gets better in the Livermore Valley, but last weeks action by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission paves the way for significant improvements.

The MTC, which sets priorities in the nine-county Bay Area, sent its list of recommended improvements with the first \$4 billion of state bond money that voters approved in the November election.

The California Transportation Commission has final say over the list, but, given the criteria that focused on reducing congestion, Interstate 580 should be on the final list.

Near the top of the Bay Area list was I-580 and its high-occupancy vehicle lanes both eastbound and westbound as well as truck lanes on the Altamont Pass.

The westbound lanes are the key. Money had been identified and construction was set to start this year on the eastbound lanes, but there was nothing for the westbound project.

Construction will make things more difficult, but its temporary.

One crucial caveat to the HOV lanes: A study is now under way to determine whether they also should be optional toll lanes.

Thats a no-brainer. Most HOV lanes are underutilized, and allowing single-driver cars to use the lanes for a fee improves utilization and generates cash.

The list also includes improvements to the Isabel Avenue/I-580 interchange, which, when coupled with the improvements that CalTrans is making through Pigeon Pass, should make the Isabel corridor more inviting for commuters bound for Fremont or the Silicon Valley.

Unfortunately, due to cost, the needed flyover from westbound I-580 to southbound I-680 was dropped from the MTC program. There will be another pot of bond money to address significant inter-regional routes that carry commerce. I-580, which carries heavy truck traffic as well as commute traffic, also will qualify for that.

During state commission deliberations, the Port-to-Port Coalition, which covers an area from the Port of Oakland to the Port of Stockton, will be actively lobbying for corridor improve-

ments.

The coalition grew out of Assemblyman Guy Houstons request that the Valley speak with one voice. That sparked a transportation summit convened by the Tri-Valley Business Council and saw the birth of the coalition.

The westbound HOV lanes also put a BART extension back onto the table. To do the westbound I-580 improvements, right-of-way for BART will be acquired. That will come from a separate pot of money; none of this portion of the state bond can be used for transit.

There are two major challenges with BART to Livermore. Its incredibly expensive at more than \$100 million per mile and, thanks to very generous union contracts, its also expensive to operate.

With the changing economy in the Valley and most companies comprising one to five employees, major facilities like those at Chevron, SBC/ATT and Safeway are the exception rather than the rule.

The large employers, which make up about 1 percent of the total firms in the Tri-Valley area, still account for one-third of the total employee base, but most of them are at best standing still on head-counts and are looking to shrink their local staffs.

Newly elected Congressman Jerry McNerney and Supervisor Scott Haggerty, during the ground-breaking last month for the first portion of improvements to I-580, talked about BART to Tracy.

Given its capital cost and operating costs, BART certainly may not be the right answer in Tracy, but some solution that reaches into San Joaquin County is critical if congestion is to be diminished.

New housing has shifted dramatically eastward during the five years of skyrocketing housing prices. For the most part, jobs have not yet followed so people are stuck with awful commutes.

Whether its express buses or an expanded ACE train capability with effective transfers, alleviating the inbound San Joaquin commuter traffic is the key and BART to Livermore doesnt get that done, despite its immense cost.

Its worth remembering that all other major highway improvements in the Valley flyovers at I-580/680, an expressway on Highway 84 and a full interchange at Isabel Avenue can be completed for about the same total as taking BART to Livermore.

The so-called triangle study was supposed to analyze which of those improvements gives the biggest bang for the buck as well as the necessity for Pleasanton to extend Stoneridge Drive east. It was due out in November and is still overdue.

Too bad the key deliberations will be done before this supposedly definitive study is ready.

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