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## Board member pushes a merger of Caltrain, BART

Transit agency talks governance reform

By Curtis Driscoll Daily Journal staff

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The Caltrain Board Friday discussed potential long-term governance model changes for the commuter rail service, with a suggestion for a regional merger with BART.



“I think that option is what most people think about,” Caltrain Board Member Steve Heminger said. “You can’t leave the obvious out.”

Heminger cited the growing closeness of the Bay Area Rapid Transit and Caltrain organizations physically and financially and thought it was an obvious option to consider and research. He wants Caltrain to be part of regional conversations about transit in the Bay Area. Heminger wanted to narrow down two or three regional transit governance options for future board discussion.

“I do think we need to look seriously at least at some of these options,” Heminger said.

The Caltrain board discussed regional transit governance changes at a March 19 special meeting. The discussion was the first of at least four special meetings to assist the board in reaching a governance recommendation by the end of the year. Some board members from San Francisco and Santa Clara counties have pushed for changes to the governance structure due to SamTrans and Caltrain’s interconnected nature. The two transit agencies have overlapping staff, and both agencies are headed by the same general manager and executive director, Jim Hartnett, who is stepping down in April. His position will separate into two different titles for Caltrain and SamTrans. The proposed governance reorganization would lead to the separation of Caltrain from SamTrans. Caltrain operates as a joint powers board with its voting members assigned from the three counties it serves — San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara.



The board debated three types of changes of Caltrain governance. Option A would modify the current structure, option B would creating a new structure and option C would pursue regional merger options. Modifying the current structure would maintain Caltrain's existing governance structure with slight modifications and keep it a shared services model. Creating a new structure or organization would reorganize Caltrain with new management and employment structure. Options A and B would also address who has the authority over the Caltrain executive director, who employs Caltrain staff, who they report to and who provides central services. Option C would modify Caltrain governance to merge or collaborate with other regional transit agencies, like BART.

Caltrain Board Member Dave Pine, also a San Mateo County supervisor, said it was too early in the process to pick favorites for governance changes. He thought option C was a separate category from the other two, given the ambition and long-term planning it would take to merge with other transit agencies. His biggest concern was the cost of these approaches, and it remains a critical factor in his decision.

"I would be concerned about the cost of creating a new entity. But I'd like to see the data," Pine said.

Part of the discussion also focused on San Mateo County and SamTrans being made whole financially for their initial investment in the Peninsula railroad corridor when other counties wouldn't. San Mateo County has never been fully repaid for its investment. SamTrans would also have to be compensated for its separation from Caltrain due to their overlap that would likely involve pension and contractual costs, and the exact number and how what funding source it comes from still needs to be figured out, Pine said. He did not want Measure RR money used to pay off debts to SamTrans. Measure RR is an eighth-cent sales tax increase passed in November 2020.

Heminger thought the current shared services model of option A lacks full accountability but is cost-effective. Option B would have accountability but would not be cost-effective.

"A and B have very striking trade-offs between them," Heminger said.



Board Member Shamann Walton, also a San Francisco supervisor, favored option B3, which would create a Peninsula Rail Transit District to govern and administer Caltrain and its staff, according to a staff presentation. He thought it gave the maximum amount of accountability and equity for all agencies. Walton said early in the meeting he wanted equitable decision-making involving all Joint Power Board agencies. He cited SamTrans' decision to name Caltrain Chief Operating Officer Michelle Bouchard as acting Caltrain executive director in April without input from San Francisco and Santa Clara counties. He said he was 100% on board with the decision to hire Bouchard, but the decision process was a major reason he wanted to change.

“We weren't consulted,” Walton said.

Board Member Charles Stone, also the Belmont mayor, wanted to approach change from a flexible standpoint and was open to different possibilities and solutions. He wanted specific information about the costs associated with each change before making any decisions.

Board Member Cindy Chavez, also a Santa Clara County supervisor, favored options B and C and was concerned about accountability and the lack of control in the hiring and firing process of staff.

Chair Dev Davis, also a San Jose councilwoman, thought of options A and B as potential interim measures but didn't rule out option C, although she thought Caltrain needed change sooner.

The board also agreed to a 2021 governance process roadmap on its objectives to reach a final governance change recommendation. According to the roadmap, the governance process is currently in Phase 1, which will focus on exploration and identifying a selection of governance options to narrow down options for Phase 2 starting in the summer. Phase 2 focuses on applying criteria and reaching a governance recommendation at a December Caltrain meeting for adoption. It would require an agreement from the three joint powers board partners from all three counties for the reform to occur.

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