

Air district may chip in for Caltrain electrification

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Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and making room for more commuters on the increasingly popular Caltrain line could get a financial boost from air quality officials who are considering allocating \$20 million toward the transit agency's plans to ditch the diesel and go electric.

Next Wednesday, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's Board of Directors will discuss a five-year deal to help fund Caltrain's Modernization Program — which seeks to electrify the track between San Francisco and San Jose, purchase electric trains and increase capacity.

There's a nexus between Caltrain's nearly \$1.5 billion effort and the air district's goals, said Deputy Air Pollution Control Officer Damian Breen.

While the project is anticipated to have significant advantages for commuters, communities along the entire rail line are also slated to benefit, Breen said.

"There's a direct health impact from the emissions in our region; diesel particulate matter is the highest source of cancer health risk in our region," Breen said. "By taking diesel trains off ... tracks and by reducing the number of vehicles that have to travel on our roads, we're improving the air quality for everybody in the region."

Drivers are helping to fund the proposed grant as 2004 legislation added a \$2 vehicle registration surcharge that contributes to the state's Air District's Mobile Source Incentive Fund, which supports programs aimed at reducing emissions and particulate matter, according to a staff report.

With Caltrain often at capacity and ridership anticipated to increase, the regional transit agency has an opportunity to make a huge impact on air quality and the general health of Bay Area residents, said David Canepa, a Daly City councilman who represents San Mateo County on the air district's Board of Directors.

"The capacity issue is really sort of holding us back in terms of really unleashing people into the system. So with electrification, this will create a tremendous, tremendous amount of capacity," Canepa said. "What we essentially have now is dirty locomotives. ... What we are doing [with electrification] is we are saying 'this is the cleanest way to move people.' So we're moving from locomotives that heavily pollute the air to a system that's electric and will reduce our GHGs (greenhouse gases) significantly."

Caltrain seeks to replace 75 percent of its fleet with electric trains by 2020, thereby reducing nearly 235,000 vehicle miles traveled per day. Full electrification by 2040 will reduce an estimated 619,000 vehicle miles traveled per day, according to the report.

"We're very pleased to have the support of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District on this project. It is probably one of the most impactful environmental projects that our region will take on in the next 10 years. With the introduction of electrification, we will be cutting greenhouse gas emissions along the rail corridor by up to 97 percent by 2040," said Caltrain spokeswoman Jayme Ackemann.

As its current diesel fleet consumes an estimated 3.4 million gallons per year, Breen said electrification will significantly improve air quality throughout the region.

"Eighty-three percent of the health risks from toxic air contamination in the Bay Area region comes from diesel particulate matter and that's emitted by trucks, trains, agricultural tractors, construction equipment, ships and cargo handling equipment and some of the largest sources of that are obviously trains," Breen said noting some of the largest trucks on the highway top off at 575 horsepower while typical diesel trains are around 3,000 horsepower.

Air district and Caltrain staff will work out a funding schedule whereby Caltrain receives the \$20 million in various annual amounts through 2020 — which may fluctuate based on the amount of revenue the district receives through the vehicle registration surcharge fund. As part of the deal, Caltrain will have to agree to scrap some of its existing locomotives after they're taken out of service, Breen said. However, because the corridor between San Jose and Gilroy will not be electrified, Caltrain must keep a portion of its diesel fleet.

The entire modernization program is slated to receive funds from a variety of sources and currently, there's an approximate \$450 million funding gap, Ackemann said.

While the \$20 million may only make a slight dent in that amount, it will provide leverage as the agency seeks other grants, Ackemann said.

"Every bit helps. We do have a funding gap of around \$450 million and there are some federal programs that we can apply for to help close that gap. But they will require that we have local matching funds and that money the Bay Area Air Quality Management District is providing can be used as local matching funds to help leverage even more money," Ackemann said.

The transit agency's customer base has exploded in seeing a 71 percent increase in ridership over the last five years alone and its current 58,000 boardings per weekday is expected to increase to 110,000 daily boardings by 2040, according to the report.

With cities across the region moving toward transit-oriented development plans, Canepa said supporting projects that will make riding the rail more convenient is a benefit to the entire region.

"This comes down to livable, walkable communities and people are not going to use public transportation if it is not convenient," Canepa said. "So if we're able to make it easier for people to move throughout the system, obviously it's helpful in creating stronger, vibrant communities and taking people out of their cars."

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District will consider the proposal to allocate \$20 million toward Caltrain at its meeting from 9:45 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, July 29 at 939 Ellis St., Seventh Floor Board Room, San Francisco. Visit www.baaqmd.gov for more information.

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