

JPB CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
San Mateo County Transit District Administrative Building
1250 San Carlos Avenue, San Carlos CA 94070

MINUTES OF JANUARY 20, 2010

MEMBERS PRESENT: P. Bendix, G. Graham, F. Granade, J. Hronowski, (Chair), B. Jenkins, S. Richardson, M. Tekchandani, B. Wilfley

MEMBERS ABSENT: Cat Tucker

STAFF PRESENT: T. Bartholomew, M. Bouchard, R. Lake, M. Simon

Chair John Hronowski called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. Mona Tekchandani led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Approval of Minutes

In the third paragraph on page five, Gerald Graham said the second Mr. Graham should read Mr. Hronowski.

The Committee (Graham/Jenkins) approved the minutes of December 16, 2009 with this change.

Public Comment

Doug DeLong, Mountain View, attended a high school diversity camp. He asked the students about the current student suicides on the railroad tracks. The students said it was a community problem, not a problem with the railroad.

Andy Chow, Redwood City, said he doesn't take Caltrain but tracks delays on Twitter, which indicated the delays were due to fatalities and mechanical issues. He said Caltrain locomotives are approaching 30 years of age and have more mechanical problems.

Chairperson's Report

- Attended the January 7 Joint Powers Board (JPB) meeting and Director Sean Elsbernd was elected chair; Director Mark Church was elected vice chair and Director Omar Ahmad will represent San Mateo County-South.

Presentation: Community Health and Suicide Prevention

Executive Officer Public Affairs Mark Simon reported:

- Caltrain became involved in a community mental health effort in August after the second death by suicide on Caltrain tracks in Palo Alto.
- During the last 10 years there has been an average of 10 suicides per year on the Caltrain right of way compared to 300 in San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.
- Caltrain, as a public entity, will try to convey the central message that the community needs to lift the stigma of mental health and suicidal tendencies and encourage people to seek services.
- The Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University is continuing with its study of fatalities on the right of way to determine if there are any identifiable trends that can guide Caltrain's policies and practices.

- Community Relations Specialist Kelly Green has joined the Palo Alto working group, which consists of a wide range of mental health specialists, educators, city leaders and community activists.
- Public Information Officer Christine Dunn and Ms. Green are organizing a media information workshop with the Palo Alto group that will feature Karen Marshall of the American Association of Suicidology. Ms. Marshall is conducting the first-ever Federal Transit Administration (FTA) study on rail suicides, and will speak to newspaper and radio news editors on appropriate media coverage of this issue.
- Suicide experts note that changing the physical dynamic of a location may help to stop cluster suicides involving teens.
- Caltrain and the City of Palo Alto have collaborated on installation of additional lighting in the area of two deaths by suicides on Caltrain tracks in Palo Alto.
- Increased conversation about deaths by suicides in Palo Alto has exponentially increased the number of students visiting high school counselors.
- Public suggestions to stop deaths by suicides on the rail include slowing the train, eliminating train service, and adding an airbag to the locomotive.
- A security guard trained in rail safety and parent volunteers monitor several areas of the tracks where teens have taken their lives on the tracks, which has resulted in taking one girl off the tracks into custody.
- Caltrain continues to present Operation Lifesaver classes throughout county schools and community organizations.

Sepi Richardson asked if deaths by suicide increase insurance rates. Rail Transportation Director Michelle Bouchard said this would be a question for risk management staff and would provide information to Ms. Richardson.

Bruce Jenkins asked if there have been similar problems on the Capitol Corridor train. Mr. Simon said this is a national problem and Caltrain is focusing on mental health issues in the community that might help solve the problem.

Brian Wilfley said it is important that Caltrain is endeavoring a unified message and offered his help. Mr. Simon said many are touched by mental health and nothing is more reassuring to a troubled person than a place to go for help.

Ms. Richardson said she sees the impact of fatalities on staff. She offered help as a public representative and elected official and suggested Caltrain speak to cities and regional organizations about their efforts as part of the solution. Mr. Simon said counseling is available to staff and people on the train immediately after an incident. He said an ad hoc group of engineers and conductors go to the home of an engineer to provide support after an incident.

Francois Granade said death by suicide on the railroad is a serious problem but the problem is, perhaps, more of perception than reality because Caltrain is saving many more lives than the number of fatalities due to all the people on the trains. Mr. Simon said the focus of the conversation about fatalities on the railroad has shifted to the right place to the mental health task force with mental health experts.

Ms. Bouchard said it was tantamount to survival of Caltrain that the focus be shifted to the right solutions rather than slowing trains, which would have huge impacts on costs, ridership and operation of the railroad.

Mr. Simon said people are on the Caltrain right of way, which Caltrain takes seriously but the role of Caltrain is to run a railroad.

Ms. Richardson said the blame shift for fatalities has changed because Caltrain has attacked the problem. Mr. Simon said the Caltrain Board, Executive Team and staff are very involved in solutions and are responsible for the installation of miles of fencing along the rail corridor, which have reduced the number of non-suicide fatalities.

Ms. Tekchandani said she appreciates Caltrain's efforts to address fatalities on the railroad and doesn't want Caltrain to forget the riding public who are emotionally involved on delayed trains. She emphasized the importance of effective notification of an incident and delays after an incident. Mr. Simon said the JPB will be asked to award a contract for a visual message sign upgrade at its February meeting and staff is meeting to formulate a strategic communication plan to address how to push information out in a timely way on the train and platform

Paul Bendix heard a comment that, in light of deaths by suicide on the railroad, Caltrain should shut down the system and run buses. He said people who don't commute don't have a sense of how Caltrain functions. Mr. Simon said when Caltrain became involved in the mental health community efforts last August, a goal was dissemination of information on what Caltrain does and getting the facts out about the operation of the train to non-commuters.

Ms. Tekchandani expressed her desire to help in any way possible. Mr. Simon said it is important to address this issue with the CAC for constructive input and for the CAC to advocate for Caltrain.

Mr. Fox expressed his wish to help.

Public Comment

Doug DeLong, Mountain View, said high school students at the diversity camp he mentioned in his earlier comment talked about pressure, grades, depression and suicide, and sometimes this interacts with the railroad. He said Caltrain would not be liable for a suicide because it is not Caltrain's fault and he has not seen an insurance claim for suicide ever come before the JPB. Mr. DeLong said Caltrain is moving to improve the notification process.

Andy Chow, Redwood City, said he is pleased to see Caltrain is being proactive on the mental health issue. He said the high school environment can be rife with gossip and rumors and people tend to be mean to each other. People need to be more caring and understanding with each other.

Staff Report

Ms. Bouchard reported:

- Declining ridership has been trending 10 percent down during the past few months and hovering around -8.7 percent compared to -9.5 percent for much of 2009.
- Annual passenger counts will begin mid-January through mid-February. Every train will be counted for five days to determine an average count.

- Caltrain is tracking on budget in terms of fare revenue and there will be no need for a fare increase if expenses are stable for the remainder of the fiscal year.
- Four special trains carried 6,700 riders on New Year's Eve. The Emerald Bowl had record ridership of 4,600.
- Caltrain is looking to the New Year for a continuation of increased ridership and stable revenue. The year ended with several fatalities and Caltrain is looking at the right combination of education, engineering and enforcement to help reduce these types of incursions, which will save lives and help train performance. During two of the last three CAC meetings staff had to deal with fatalities, which impacts the committee and it was important for the CAC to hear Mr. Simon's presentation on community health and suicide prevention.

Committee Comments

Mr. Jenkins said rail advocate Norm Rolfe passed away. Mr. Rolfe was a member of Bay Rail Alliance, the Transbay CAC and a supporter of Caltrain, especially for electrification. He asked that the meeting be adjourned in memory of Mr. Rolfe.

Mr. Granade said Mr. Rolfe played a role in saving Caltrain and efforts of people like Mr. Rolfe can drastically improve things.

Gerald Graham was riding the Coast Starlight train to Los Angeles and riders from Sacramento mentioned Caltrain and the deaths by suicides of Gunn High School students.

Ms. Tekchandani said she appreciated the article in a newspaper about Caltrain's Web site comment addressing train delays. She wished the Web site offered a means for feedback.

Ms. Tekchandani asked if annual counts include the number of bicyclists that are bumped. Ms. Bouchard said annual bump counts are largely related to specific studies. Bump counts were to be completed in November 2009 but will be done during high season in June/July in order to get better data. Ms. Tekchandani said it is important that staff doing January/February counts let bicyclists know that bump counts will be done in June.

Date, Time, and Place of Next Meeting

Wednesday, February 17, 2010, 6 p.m., San Mateo County Transit District Administrative Building, 2nd Floor Bacciocco Auditorium, 1250 San Carlos Avenue, San Carlos, CA

The meeting was adjourned at 7:09 p.m. in memory of Norm Rolfe.