

The Keys to Better Bus Service in Ventura County: Consolidate the Unconnected Bus Systems

by Supervisor Linda Parks, July 2015

With a dozen different bus operators in our county, you'd think you could take a bus from one place to another. Yet as Supervisor Peter Foy and his Chief of Staff discovered via a 3.5-hour marathon bus ride from Simi Valley to Ventura, you may not want to do it ever again.

Each day our freeways clog with tens of thousands of Ventura County residents commuting to jobs from one end of the county to the other. The lack of alternatives to driving a car to work furthers traffic congestion and air pollution in cities from Simi Valley to Santa Paula.

According to the Grand Jury, the lack of a coordinated countywide bus system makes for long wait times, discourages ridership, and is particularly difficult for students, seniors and people with disabilities.

Since Simi Valley, Moorpark, Thousand Oaks, Camarillo, Ojai, the County, VCTC (Ventura County Transportation Commission), Oxnard, and Gold Coast Transit all have separate bus systems, there are different staff and boards of directors determining routes, schedules, fares, and infrastructure. When you combine all the money and staff time spent administering the different systems, it's obvious there are cost savings to be had if the services were combined into a single call center, administration, board of directors, and bus operator. In addition to cost savings, one bus system benefits bus riders with coordinated routes, fares, and better access throughout the county.

A step in the right direction was the formation of the East County Transit Alliance with Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, Camarillo and the County looking at ways to coordinate their five separate bus systems. Unfortunately, ECTA's first effort to start a Dial-A-Ride service hit a bump in the road when a disagreement between Camarillo and the other ECTA members resulted in the decision to have two separate Dial-A-Rides for the ECTA area, but ECTA won't be picking up Camarillo's seniors when it goes to Camarillo.

The best example in our county of a coordinated bus system is Gold Coast Transit, a single bus system with daily service to Oxnard, Ventura, Port Hueneme and Ojai. With close to 4 million annual riders it is also the county's largest. Each city that Gold Coast serves has a city councilmember on Gold Coast's board deciding its service and operations.

Last year Gold Coast Transit successfully became a special district that enables it to directly receive a portion of the state sales tax. The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo), charged with determining the future growth boundaries of the Gold Coast district, decided to allow all the cities in the county to join Gold Coast in the future, if they wanted. By encompassing all cities, even those with their own transit system, LAFCo left options open for future collaboration towards a unified and efficient countywide bus system. Yet cities not

already on the Gold Coast board objected. They said they enjoy their “transit autonomy” and being in Gold Coast’s sphere goes against their need for local control.

The potential for more cities to join Gold Coast Transit District and the formation of the East County Transit Alliance offers hope for better bus service countywide. Pooling transit funds and streamlining the dozen bus systems will save tax dollars. Such a coordinated system is achievable and will entice more people out of their cars. Your elected councilmembers and county supervisors hold the keys and make it possible, or impossible, to take a bus from one place to another.