



Thinking outside of the box

Sky-high home values. Crawling traffic on Highway 101. Slim financing for public transit. Cars using 101 to drive through a county where beaches gleam and forested hills beckon.

Marin County in 2007? Sure.

But this could also describe San Mateo County in 2000. In some respects, the differences between the sisters of San Francisco are nil. Average household income, geography, the major freeway – 101 – and even the earthquake fault – San Andreas – are much the same. San Mateo has Highway 280 and Marin does not, but traffic moves much better in San Mateo for an entirely different reason: San Mateo has invested massively in rail transit, and the outcomes are now obvious.

Recent congestion data from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission suggests that San Mateo County has made major strides in congestion relief by shifting drivers to Caltrain – 2 million riders per year since 2004 – and extending BART to SFO Airport. Daily weekday vehicle hours of delay in San Mateo County declined 3 percent from 2004 to 2005 *and a stunning 30 percent from 2001 to 2005*. No other county in the Bay Area has made the same progress.

Meanwhile, Marin and Sonoma suffered through more traffic during those years – *30 percent-plus increases in congestion*.

While BART to the airport took decades, current Caltrain service successes occurred in less than four years due to outside-of-the-box thinking, funding that leveraged an existing railroad right of way into a skyrocketing success story,

and factors common to most Bay Area counties – congestion, high gas prices, and a recovering economy.

The story starts with Baby Bullet, and it's a story with lessons to ponder for Marin's policymakers.

Baby Bullets are not true "bullet" trains. True bullet trains travel in excess of 200 miles per hour. Caltrain Baby Bullets travel at a peak of 79 miles per hour.

However, Baby Bullets are fast because they make fast trips, and they make limited stops at major employment centers. Compared to prior Caltrain service, Baby Bullets cut travel time between San Francisco and San Jose by more than one-third to just under one hour.

Baby Bullets use passing tracks to overtake and safely bypass both local and express trains during commute periods. Caltrain orchestrates this dance of Baby Bullets, local, and express trains throughout commute hours and runs 96 trains per day, all with on-time performance in excess of 95 percent.

The name Baby Bullet is a consumer signal, and it was an early example of outside-of-the-box thinking. By dubbing the core service Baby Bullet, Caltrain conveyed a simple idea to consumers: *If you take our trains, you'll get there faster*.

Since Baby Bullets were launched in mid-2004, average weekday ridership on all Caltrain service – Baby Bullet, express, and local trains – is up a phenomenal 36 percent. Passenger fare revenue is up more than 80 percent – a result of skyrocketing ridership, increased numbers of trains, *and increased fares*.

That's right: Caltrain's service is so popular that riders flock to it *despite paying more*.

In addition to smart positioning and value pricing in the minds of consumers, Caltrain demonstrated a razor-sharp knowledge of passenger needs.

When faced with a \$13.5 million budget deficit in 2005, Caltrain did the unthinkable for a public transit agency – rather than cut service to cut costs, it added ten more Baby Bullets to increase service from 86 trains per day to a new high of 96, without adding any new staff or equipment.

Have you ever heard of a transit agency that solves its budget problems by providing *even better service*? Most cut service until they lose credibility. Caltrain took the plunge and trusted its riders and the instincts of its managers. That's definitely outside-of-the-box thinking.

Caltrain had another problem. It couldn't spend more money, except for increased fuel, to increase service. Management went to labor and obtained an agreement to run more trains with the same staff. Mid-level managers had to make the increased schedule work *reliably*. After some early glitches, reliability is excellent, and the addition of 10 Baby Bullets has attracted even more riders, all with minimal additional operating expense.

The lesson? *Outside-of-the-box thinking embraces the moderate risk of failure in pursuit of the overwhelming benefit of serving additional customers*.

Through its transformation, Caltrain removes an additional 2 million drivers from highways 101 and 280 and the

Peninsula's congested streets, each year. Caltrain isn't the only source of congestion relief, but the message is clear: Public transit works. And Caltrain is a much bigger part of public transit now than at any other time in its history.

Most transit projects take decades to deliver. Knowing this, I approached Caltrain in January of 2000 when I was a State Senator representing San Francisco and San Mateo counties. I asked Caltrain what we could do to reduce congestion *quickly* in the midst of the dotcom boom.

Caltrain's managers responded with the first of what became many examples of outside-of-the box thinking. Instead of talking about distant deadlines, they pulled the idea of a Caltrain Express from the back of a planning document, threw it onto the top of the pile, and challenged me to locate \$127 million in state funding to get the job done. I dickered a bit and demanded that they deliver in three years. They agreed. A partnership was born.

My approach to advocacy for Baby Bullet was unorthodox.

I let two major political columnists know about the project and provided a map and details for Baby Bullet. I had already encouraged Caltrain to ditch the ultra-bureaucratic CTX label in favor of Baby Bullet. Thus, Baby Bullet was positioned from the get-go as simple to achieve and powerful in its benefit – a project that would cut travel time significantly between traffic-choked San Francisco and San Jose.

Governor Gray Davis read those columnists every morning, and he read about Baby Bullet as he was eating his toasted muffin. That was the year the State had a \$12 billion surplus, and the Governor was looking for ways to spend \$5 billion on congestion-management solutions. When he arrived at his office that morning, he asked his staff if Baby

Bullet was included in his soon-to-be released Traffic Congestion Relief Plan. Told that it was not, Governor Davis delivered a simple order: Put it in.

Thus \$127 million was secured for Baby Bullet.

This little bit of history demonstrates a lesson that I learned in transit advocacy as a public policymaker: *Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.*

Baby Bullet was one small part of a "perfect" 10-year plan, buried where no one could see it, misnamed so that no one would recognize its potential, and described in technocratic terms so that consumers couldn't understand it. But what the project had going for it was what consumers *wanted*: rapid, reliable service commencing within a few years.

Public policymakers should feel com-

fortable championing "good" opportunities, and not be shy about saying that these ideas are not revolutionary. *Consumers want valuable service, not revolutions.* They want what works – period.

In addition, policymakers should encourage staff to think outside of the box about how to serve consumers *now*. Working across state and local government lines to do so also is essential.

There is a roadmap for policymakers and concerned citizens seeking traffic relief in Marin: Caltrain and its willingness to rapidly produce something that pleased consumers rather than something more grandiose. Marin's SMART initiative may be just what the public will embrace.

The public is waiting – in traffic – for someone to think outside of the box.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jackie Speier

Former Senator Speier's legacy as a policymaker and public servant in California began over 25 years ago. During her time in the Senate, Jackie set an unprecedented record of over 300 pieces of legislation signed into law by both Democratic and Republican Governors. Jackie joined Hanson Bridgett in May 2007. She works within the firm's Public Agency Section with a crossover role supporting the interest of clients throughout the firm's comprehensive array of legal practices. Hanson Bridgett is a law firm of over 130 attorneys with offices in the North Bay, San Francisco and Sacramento.

HANSON BRIDGETT
80 E. Sir Francis Drake Blvd. Ste. 3-E
Larkspur, CA 94939
415-925-8400 • www.hansonbridgett.com

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