Caltrain to Go Electric Starting in 2019  
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Caltrain is being upgraded, in ways that may provide better service to Potrero Hill and South-of-Market residents, according to a representative of the commuter rail line. But some Southside residents have lingering concerns about the system’s ability to absorb a growing number of riders.

The Caltrain Modernization Program, currently underway, has three parts. The first is a federally-mandated enhanced signal system dubbed CBOSS — Communications Based Overlay Signal System—that’ll add positive train controls to the system. “Positive train control is a system that will automatically stop trains that are going too fast; it will stop trains if there’s a train ahead of another train on the train tracks; and it will stop the trains if an engineer misses a red signal,” said Christine Dunn, public information officer for Caltrain. “It’s a safety system, and we are mandated by the federal government to have that in place by the end of 2015.”

CBOSS installation has begun in the corridor; right now work is being done in Redwood City. A compressor bores a small hole into the ground of the right of way, conduit is pulled through the hole, and fiber optic cable is pulled through the conduit. CBOSS installation will begin in San Francisco later this year. Nearby residents will be notified via a mailer when the work is scheduled to take place at the 22nd Street station. The work is done at night to avoid interfering with train service and to minimally affect neighbors.
According to Caltrain’s communications manager Jayme Ackemann, “This is pretty low impact work as far as these kinds of projects go because really all we’re doing right now is laying fiber optics cable. It’s just we’re prepping the ground and we move through pretty quickly so there shouldn’t be long-term construction work going on in that location.”

There’ll be more construction-related impacts when Caltrain begins the second part of its modernization program: electrification. Electric infrastructure, including substations, overhead wires, and poles will be installed starting in 2016. The community will be kept abreast of the timing and work locations via mailers and fliers as well. The third part of the modernization program entails replacing Caltrain’s diesel trains with high-performance electric trains, called “electric multiple units.” The first electric trains are scheduled to be in operation by 2019. “Because these are electric, there will be considerably less noise, dramatically reduced air pollution [by between 56 and 84 percent], and that will be a positive benefit for the community whether they take the train or not,” Dunn said. “We’ll also be able to offer more service, and the reason we’ll be able to do that is because it takes less time to stop and start an electric train, so we’ll able to operate more trains, and we won’t need to have as much time and distance between trains.”

Because the trains will be able to stop and start more quickly, additional stations will be served. The trip from San Jose to San Francisco will take the same amount of time, but will stop more frequently. “Although most of our trains are nearing full capacity, but our most popular trains with highest demand are what we call our baby bullet express train,” Ackemann said. “They make the trip between San Jose and San Francisco in just under an hour; they only make about six to eight station stops during the entire trip.”

Electrification also allows Caltrain to rethink its schedule to either serve more stops within the same time period, or keep the same number of stations but make the trip faster. “There are some exciting potential benefits that we can get out of electrification, we don’t have anything like a final schedule yet, so we don’t know exactly what that will look like in terms of service,” Ackemann said.

With the changes, Caltrain expects ridership to increase dramatically, even though the line is already experiencing the highest ridership the system has seen in 150 years of service. “[R]ight now, we have trains that are at standing room only during the peak commute hours...so we have some very crowded trains, and if we’re able to offer more service then not only are we going to be able to attract more riders, but we’re going to be able to better accommodate the crowds that we already have,” Dunn said. On an average weekday, Caltrain has roughly 52,000 riders daily. It expects that number to jump to 69,000 with modernization.

A regular Caltrain commuter, Hill resident Michael Fitzsimons, 33, said he’s excited that efforts are being made to improve the rail line, but he’s concerned about bicycles. “I
know from personal experience that these trains are beyond capacity for bikes already. More ridership generally will just make this worse if no additional accommodation is made."

Caltrain said because it hasn’t begun the procurement process for the electric multiple units it can’t determine how many bikes will be accommodated on board the new trains.

Hill resident Robert Chen, 29, echoed Fitzsimons’ concerns. “As much as Caltrain has been an important mode of transportation for me, I’ve had my share of frustrations with Caltrain. It is often delayed, sometimes up to hours due to various issues, including frequent mechanical problems. Also, the trains are getting increasingly crowded and I can barely find any place to stand during rush hours. Furthermore, I used to bring my bike into Caltrain and bike the last stretch to work, but I stopped doing that since these days it’s impossible to get your bike on to the train due to extremely limited bike space.” Chen said he’d welcome electrification if it alleviates these issues. “In fact, 2019 seems awfully far away and I really wish it can happen sooner,” he said.

Another Hill resident and frequent Caltrain commuter, Fred Tarabout, 29, agreed. “This is great news in my opinion, and that update is long overdue. Caltrain’s diesel engines are polluting antiques! I wish they could deal with the overcrowding sooner as this is seriously getting worse every year. No idea how it’ll go by 2019; the train is already so packed at rush hour ... especially for bike riders that can’t always get a spot for their bike.”

Other Hill residents are more optimistic. Santhi Analytis, 29, said she hopes the process is smooth and creates a ripple effect. “Ideally, this will pave the way for more lines and extended services, including connecting to the East Bay. It would be great if it prompts other environmentally sound and highly anticipated public transportation projects, such as the SF to LA high speed line.”

Caltrain’s modernization program, costing $1.5 billion, is funded through a nine-party agreement that leverages local, regional, and federal funding to match $705 million in voter-approved high-speed rail bond revenues.

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