

How to Develop a Successful Carpool to Rail Program (Carpool to BART)

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Background

In October 2000, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) staff held a meeting of interested agencies with the intention of forming a BART Carpool Taskforce. The purpose of the Taskforce was to provide input to increase the number of commuters carpooling to the BART stations to maximize existing capacity. The BART system at the time was transporting approximately 320,000 commuters per day, with a total parking inventory system-wide of about 59,000 spaces. Much pressure was coming from commuters, public officials and the media to address the fact that by 8 a.m. almost all BART non-carpool parking was full, while most carpool-designated spaces were empty.

For approximately 10 years, BART had contracted with the Regional Rideshare Program (RIDES for Bay Area Commuters) to administer its carpool permit process. BART had provided signage and carpool designation for the stations, while RIDES maintained the database of carpool permit recipients and would distribute permits to those who applied. Any car parking in the designated lot was required to display at least two permits on the dash in order to be permitted to park in the carpool lot. There was no charge to the carpoolers. The program had been languishing for several years due to many factors. BART was interested in resurrecting and improving the program.

Issues

Several other issues had arisen which forced BART officials to consider changes. Several BART station areas had near-by residential neighborhoods voicing frustration due to the fact that BART commuters were parking in their neighborhoods, eliminating the available parking for residents. Some jurisdictions even instituted residential parking permit programs so that local police could better enforce parking violators.

An additional issue centered around the Pleasant Hill BART station located in Contra Costa County, which had (and still has) the highest number of commuters accessing the BART system during the a.m. peak period. At issue was the imminent removal of an important ancillary parking lot serving almost 600 cars. Redevelopment of the area was forcing the removal of the lot with no additional parking replacement opportunities. Many alternative options were being considered by local agencies to address this loss of parking, including additional

bicycle access facilities, shuttles, more bus service, off site parking and improving and marketing the Carpool to BART program.

Taskforce

The Taskforce was comprised of agency representatives who could provide suggestions and solutions to the under-utilization of the designated carpool spaces at most BART stations. The Taskforce included representatives from BART (Planning, Access, Marketing and Police departments), the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, RIDES, Contra Costa County Community Development Department and the Contra Costa Commute Alternative Network.

Prior to the first Taskforce meeting which took place in October 2000, BART conducted two focus groups to discuss carpooling to BART. One focus group included those who currently carpool to BART and the other was of non-carpool riders. The focus groups discussed promotional information, rules and regulations, application process and parking availability for carpooling.

Several issues surfaced both in the focus groups and by the Taskforce:

- Public confusion over the rules to qualify for the program, including how to register or whom to call for information (better marketing)
- Inadequate signage
- Concern over permits (whether to have ones that expire annually or not)
- Permits only really 'hunting licenses', no numbered or specific reserved spaces assigned; need for information
- Suggestion that there always be some unused carpool spaces available so as not to be a deterrent on days where more carpoolers go to one station than another
- Not enough monitoring of the lots by BART police- one officer for three to four stations; some stations only monitored once or twice a week, and not always between 6-10a.m. (the hours for the restricted carpool parking)
- Adequate fines for abusers of the program (only \$25 fine)

Surveys

In order to gather some much-needed information about the existing carpool parking status, BART hired a consultant in February 2001. The intent was to conduct a station parking survey at each of the BART stations which had carpool parking (only a few had none). Since the study was only to include a single evaluation for each station on one day in February, CC CAN staff also conducted additional parking surveys of the three central County BART stations. It was determined that the more information gathered, the more useful the information would be to determine future changes in policies. Two BART stations of particular interest in central County were the Pleasant Hill and Bay Point stations, both of which were filled to capacity by 8 a.m.

Simultaneous with the parking studies, RIDES provided CC CAN with names and address of individuals registered in the BART carpool database. CC CAN sent

out surveys to all who had registered since the program was begun in order to update the database and purge it of inactive carpoolers. Questions were asked of those who were still carpooling for the purposes of assessing current and potential demand for carpool spaces. Historically no commuters in the BART carpool program had been asked at which station they would most likely park. This information was considered crucial in the development process of the revised program.

Signage

At the Taskforce meetings the issue of signage was considered very important. Samples of the existing carpool signage was presented to the group for review and comment. One look at the signs and it was clear why the public was confused about the program. In some cases only a blue BART Pool sign was displayed at designated spaces, with no phone numbers, explanation of what a BART Pool was, timeframe for restrictions, nor any other helpful information about the program. In other cases only an indication of applicable hours was posted.

A sample carpool parking lot sign was presented for review and comment. The sign included a phone number for RIDES, hours of operation for carpool lot, number of BART riders needed to qualify for a carpool permit and when the lot would open to the general public if not filled by carpool riders. Before the signs were approved, however, much discussion centered around whether to combine the carpool and mid-day parking lots, how to expand the carpool lots should they become filled, and other considerations.

Fines

Discussion also included the enforcement of the rules and regulations by BART police and CSAs (Community Service Assistants) with limited police powers who give citations to violators). The Taskforce suggested that the fine be increased to make violators pay more for the fine than they would pay to park in a pay-lot in San Francisco. The current fine was only \$25, and it was suggested that \$100 would be a more appropriate fine and deterrent to those parking illegally in the carpool spaces. (The carpool lots are all located closest to each station compared to the general parking, therefor they are even more desirable).

Permits

Having new, dated permits that expired every 1 to 3 years was discussed as part of the focus group evaluation. It was the consensus of all that having to renew carpool permits was an administrative cost and effort that had little merit. Increased enforcement to ensure proper use of carpool areas was of greater importance than renewable permits and the creation of a database.

Carpool Lot Capacity

It was suggested that if the spaces designated for BART carpool parking became full prior to 10:00 a.m., BART should add additional spaces ASAP. A lack of parking spaces would be the largest detriment to continued use of the BART carpool program. Much discussion centered around what the trigger mechanism would be to determine whether to add additional carpool spaces at stations. The issue of system continuity was also a concern. It was suggested that it would be preferable to always maintain a 10% capacity to encourage additional carpoolers. It was the general consensus of the group that if carpoolers tried to park and all of the carpool spaces were taken, they would get back onto the freeway, and they would be less likely to want to carpool in the future.

Mid-Day lots

To further complicate the situation, most stations also had Mid-Day parking lots. These smaller lots were no-parking areas until after 10 a.m. when they would be available to mid-day users. It was suggested that perhaps the two lots could be combined so that prior to 10 a.m. the entire combined lot could be available to carpoolers, and after that it would open up to all BART commuters. This seemed like a simple and effective way to make it easier for the late commuters and shoppers while providing potentially more spaces for carpoolers without taking spaces from the general lots.

Marketing

Due to many complications concerning established rules and regulations on the use of the carpool lots, the BART marketing department wasn't able to market the revised program. The BART board at the time was weighing additional options and concerns about system-wide parking due to the opening of the new BART line to San Francisco airport. This forced a delay in many decisions having to do with enforcement, fines, long-term parking, additional capacity, etc. It was agreed that CC CAN would develop a pilot program in Contra Costa County to encourage more use of the carpool lots.

Carpool to BART Pilot Program

CC CAN developed the Carpool to BART Incentive Program as a pilot program in early March 2001. Although the focus would be to market and advertise the campaign in Contra Costa County, CC CAN agreed to fulfill all requests for new carpools. The emphasis was to fill the carpool spaces, particularly at the Bay Point and Pleasant Hill stations. Out of a total parking capacity of 2,032 spaces, Bay Point had 192 carpool spaces, while Pleasant Hill's total capacity was 3,447 with 150 carpool spaces. Neither of the stations routinely had more than 25-30 carpoolers per day before the promotion.

The Carpool to BART program offered each new carpooler, a \$20 BART pass and a \$20 gas card. In addition, all new registrants were provided with parking permits by RIDES, which handled the permit distribution. CC CAN and RIDES worked closely in making the incentive and permit process as seamless as

possible for the carpoolers. The promotion was publicized in the local papers each day for one month and BART assisted with a 'seat drop' on the BART trains. By the summer of 2001, all carpool spaces at the central Contra Costa stations were filled. While the campaign was being conducted, the Taskforce continued to meet and make adjustments to the carpool parking policies. Fortunately as the lots were filling, BART made the decision to combine the carpool and mid-day lots, adding much capacity for potential carpoolers. New signs were also approved and installed which assisted commuters.

The Carpool to BART Program is a very good example of an effective carpool to rail program. Many factors contributed to the success of the program. Among them are the fact that BART has discretionary control over most parking at its stations, the value of focus group comments and stakeholder input, cooperative agencies working toward a common goal and parking demand which allowed for an environment where commuters would be willing to give carpooling a try, given a little incentive and an easy explanation of the process. This program is one which could easily be replicated elsewhere. It allowed for maximizing and expanding the parking capacity of the BART system without additional paving, or expensive right of way acquisition, or parking structures.