

2001-2002 SANTA CLARA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

REVIEW OF THE SANTA CLARA VALLEY TRANSIT AUTHORITY

INTRODUCTION

In October 2001, the Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) initiated a six-month review of the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority (VTA). The review covered safety and security, schedule compliance and quality of service. Authorization to conduct the review is provided by California Penal Code Section 925(a), which states the Grand Jury may "...investigate and report on the operations and accounts and records ...of any such city or Joint Powers Agency and make such recommendations it may deem proper and fit."

BACKGROUND

In January 1995, the Santa Clara County Transit District and the Santa Clara County Congestion Management Agency were merged, creating the VTA. The new agency was charged with the responsibility for countywide transportation planning and funding, as well as for bus, light rail and outreach operations.

The VTA board of directors initially adopted a 10-year strategic plan, including vision and mission statements giving the following policy direction:

- The vision is to provide a transportation system that allows anyone to go anywhere in the region easily and efficiently.
- The mission is to provide the public with a safe and efficient countywide transportation system. The emphasis is

on an integrated transportation system, including car, bus, rail system, walking and bicycling paths allowing the public to travel easily and comfortably by the most appropriate means.

Each year, the VTA establishes performance measurements and targets. The agency evaluates its performance, updates the strategic plan yearly and publishes an annual performance report. The Fiscal Year 2000-2001 Performance Report was referenced as a part of this review.

The VTA is a joint powers agency with a current fiscal year 2001-2002 budget of \$337 million. It is charged with the operations of the county transit system and the planning and construction management of rail and highway programs. The Grand Jury review encompassed specific functions of three departments: the transportation operations department, the marketing and customer service department and the security department. [Reference Attachment: organization chart for the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, as included in the VTA Comprehensive Annual Financial Report.]

Safety and Security

The VTA measures accident safety by the number of miles traveled between chargeable accidents. Accidents are deemed chargeable if they could have been avoided had the operator followed VTA procedures. The VTA measures passenger and operator security by the number of assaults. Passenger assault statistics are based on the number of assaults per million passengers. When compiling and presenting statistics for

accident safety and passenger security, The VTA does not include information on contract or joint transit agency operations managed by other authorities, such as the Dumbarton Express, Highway 17 Express, Gilroy Caltrain or Outreach Paratransit.

Information on accidents is entered into a database for tracking purposes, and a five-person committee reviews each accident to determine if it was chargeable or non-chargeable. The review committee is comprised of a road supervisor, a maintenance supervisor, a deputy sheriff and two representatives of the Amalgamated Transit Union. In case of chargeable accidents, the operator involved is counseled and given corrective training, as deemed appropriate by the operator's supervisor. A written warning or other discipline may also be initiated, as long as these actions adhere to a specific documented procedure.

Responsibility for passenger and operator security falls under the auspices of the VTA security department. The security department has three resources to accomplish its goals: internal staff, the sheriff's department, and a contracted security agency. Internal staff is responsible for the planning, management and administration of the security program. The sheriff's transit squad provides law enforcement services and coordination with city police departments. The contracted security agency provides security services for light rail stations and VTA facilities.

In addition, VTA vehicles are equipped with onboard communications units that allow real-time monitoring of conditions on the bus or light rail car by the operations control center. These units encompass silent alarms and real-time radio communications. Onboard units are not always operational.

In July 2001, the VTA introduced the Route Stabilization Team (RST), a proactive pilot program to improve passenger security. The RST comprises three deputies, two plain-clothed and one uniformed, patrolling specified bus routes in an unmarked car. The plain-clothed deputies get on and off the buses, observing conditions on the vehicles and at the bus stops, and issuing citations or making arrests as required. The VTA expects to add additional teams in the near future.

In recent months, the sheriff's transit squad has also toughened its approach to issuing citations for minor infractions. This is intended to ward off more serious violations that would have a direct impact on rider or operator safety.

Schedule Compliance

The VTA defines schedule compliance as the ratio of individual bus or light rail trips completed to the number of trips scheduled. This does not include on-time performance.

The VTA reviews routes and service schedules on a continual basis and produces an annual transit service plan that identifies reductions or additions. Items that most often impact the VTA's ability to maintain schedule compliance are the availability of equipment and the availability of operators. In recent years, both of these areas were affected by the VTA's difficulty in recruiting and hiring sufficient personnel. Indeed, during the fiscal year 2000-2001, this problem necessitated a midyear reduction of planned service when the VTA had to rebalance the services scheduled with the resources available.

Quality of Customer Service

In order to improve the service offered to transit riders, the VTA introduced the Back-to-Basics Program in June 2001. This

program serves both the bus and light rail systems, using agency supervisors and administrative personnel to observe operators and report on fare compliance, calling stops, customer orientation and schedule adherence. The program also requires operators to complete and sign a comprehensive written vehicle checklist prior to leaving the yard. This checklist includes items of safety, operations and cleanliness.

Information regarding routes, schedules, passes and other VTA services is available to the public in a number of ways. These include materials at the stations, on vehicles, at the VTA offices and at libraries and other public buildings. Customers may also call the VTA information line or access the website. In addition, transit maps are printed in many of the local telephone directories.

Customers can make complaints to the VTA in person, via e-mail, U.S. mail or telephone. The complaints are entered into a database that is a part of the VTA's customer awareness program, dubbed Customers Are Resources to Excellence (CARE). During one of its visits to the VTA, the Grand Jury reviewed and tracked a selection of complaints from initial receipt through entry into the CARE database.

New complaints are first sent to the appropriate supervisor for action. The supervisor is required to respond in one of three ways: 1) will fix, 2) have fixed, or 3) cannot fix. The customer is then notified in writing regarding what action has been taken or will be taken. If the problem cannot be fixed, the customer is notified as to the reason. The file on the complaint is then closed.

FACTS

1. In the calendar year 2001, there were 397 reported accidents within the VTA. Of the 79 that involved passengers, one was deemed preventable in a VTA review. Of the 317 collisions, 170 were deemed preventable. In addition, there was one non-passenger, non-collision incident.
2. Bus and light rail safety for the fiscal year 2000-2001, as reflected by the number of miles traveled between chargeable accidents, was not significantly different from the prior year.
3. Based upon the evidence provided the Grand Jury, VTA executive management does not regularly review or analyze changes in accident data.
4. In the fiscal year 2000-2001, there was an average of two reported assaults per month on bus operators. There was one assault for the year on light rail operators. This is apparently due to the fact that light rail operators work in a secured cabin, separated from passengers.
5. For the fiscal year 2000-2001, the assault rate for light rail passengers was 2.1 per million riders. For the same period, the assault rate for bus passengers was 0.8 per million riders. This equals an assault rate for light rail passengers 2.6 times greater than the rate for bus passengers.
6. For the fiscal year 2000-2001, citations by sheriff's deputies for minor infractions involving the VTA increased 17 percent over the prior year. During

the same period, physical arrests declined nine percent.

7. There has been no request from the VTA for a security evaluation by the sheriff's Risk Analysis Division in response to the events of September 11, 2001.
8. Onboard communications units are sometimes inoperable, as is the operations control center equipment. Cellular telephones are provided to operators as a stopgap measure whenever the communications units are identified as faulty. Unlike the communications units, cellular telephones do not provide silent alarm capabilities or allow the operations control center to monitor activities on the vehicle.
9. The VTA plans to equip all buses and light rail vehicles with an Advanced Communications System (ACS) that will include global positioning satellite units for vehicle location and video surveillance units that have transmission capabilities. Implementation is currently underway with half the buses expected to be fully equipped and operational by the end of 2002.
10. A new operations control center that is compatible with ACS is due to become operational in the summer of 2002.
11. All light rail vehicles currently operated by the VTA will be exchanged for new vehicles compliant with the most recent interpretation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. These vehicles will be delivered with ACS equipment installed. Final exchange of vehicles is expected to be complete in June of 2004.
12. For the period of July 1, 2001, to December 31, 2001, the VTA reported bus schedule compliance of 99.3 percent. For its six-year history, the VTA reported overall bus schedule compliance of 99.3 percent. Schedule compliance is defined by the VTA as the ratio of individual trips completed to the number of trips planned. This definition does not include any accommodation for on-time performance. The Grand Jury found no evidence of an ongoing process to track and analyze on-time performance.
13. In April 2001, VTA routes and service schedules were reduced to accommodate a shortage of operators and maintenance technicians. Recruitment efforts have since been expanded, increasing the number of applications for employment. Prior level of service has not been restored.
14. As part of its Back-to-Basics Program, the VTA compiled data from anonymous observations of 282 bus operators in August 2001. There were 455 notations of noncompliance. Thirty-five percent of surveyed operators were in full compliance. The actual result, as presented by VTA management in a memo dated November 2001, is displayed in the following table compiled by the Grand Jury:

BACK-TO-BASICS SURVEY, AUGUST 2001

# of Events	% of Bus Oper.	Noncompliance Item Operator was...
111	39	not announcing stops as required
84	30	not wearing seat-belt
76	27	operating ahead of schedule
68	24	not in proper uniform
44	16	operating in an unsafe manner
33	12	listening to radio or using cell phone
20	7	not properly collecting fares
7	3	intentionally delaying the schedule
7	3	rude to passengers or other motorists
5	2	off route or skipping stops

15. The August 2001 Back-to-Basics Survey (noted in table above) concluded that of 282 bus operators observed, 76 operated ahead of schedule and seven were intentionally delaying the schedule.
16. Supervisors and administrative staff are serving as rider-observers for the Back-to-Basics Program. Negotiations are in process to expand the observation efforts to include an outside consulting group that will provide independent observers to travel on VTA vehicles.
17. The VTA has procedures in place for complaint tracking and resolution. The CARE database system provides the ability to maintain extensive complaint records, but it has limited report generation capabilities.
18. Based upon evidence provided to the Grand Jury, VTA management does not routinely compile and publish reports of indicators for quality of service or customer satisfaction, such as numbers or types of customer complaints.
19. Station announcements on both the bus and light rail vehicles are frequently skipped, garbled or unintelligible.

20. Light rail station signs and the name of the station are not always visible from inside the car, either in advance of the station or while stopped at the station. This situation is exacerbated at night.

FINDINGS

1. The VTA has done a good job of collecting information on vehicle accidents, however other than compiling statistics for the annual report, there has been little management analysis and utilization of the data. (Ref. Facts #1, 2 & 3)
2. Passengers on light rail are at significantly higher risk for assault than passengers on buses. This disparity reveals an unacceptable risk for light rail passengers. (Ref. Fact #5)
3. The VTA has not devoted sufficient attention to heightened security concerns underscored by the events of September 11, 2001. (Ref. Fact #7)
4. The planned upgrade of VTA's entire communications systems should alleviate current communications deficiencies. Implementation is expected to be complete in 2004. In the meantime, the practice of relying on cellular telephones to fill in for inoperable onboard communications units is inadequate to assure passenger and operator security. (Ref. Facts #8, 9, 10 & 11)
5. The VTA does not sufficiently track and evaluate on-time performance of its buses and light rail vehicles. Confidence levels for customer destination arrival at the scheduled time, especially for trips that involved multiple transfers, is not known. There is a serious need for VTA to improve on-time performance. This

one issue holds great significance for the quality of service being provided to transit customers. (Ref. Facts # 12, 14 & 15)

6. The VTA has identified a number of customer service problems that need correction by way of its Back-to-Basics Program. (Ref. Facts # 14 & 16)
7. The VTA has done a good job of collecting information and statistics on customer complaints in the CARE database; however, the system does not provide comprehensive reports that could be useful in determining ways to improve service and performance. (Ref. Facts # 17 & 18)
8. Station identification signage and sign visibility on the light rail system is inadequate to effectively serve passengers. (Ref. Fact # 20)

CONCLUSIONS

The Grand Jury believes the overall efforts of the employees at the VTA are providing the residents of Santa Clara County with a quality transit system. However, the Grand Jury is concerned that transportation operations management is more often focused on improving image than on analyzing data and implementing proactive strategies for improving service.

The Grand Jury also believes that the sheriff's recent implementation of a near-zero tolerance policy and the issuance of more citations for minor infractions is engendering an improvement in security. This approach seems to have resulted in a decrease in the need for arrests for more serious infractions. The current numbers are in contrast to prior years, when arrests increased in proportion to rider volume.

The Grand Jury observed that the VTA places a high level of importance on providing the quantity of service promised in their published schedule, as measured by the ratio of trips completed to trips scheduled. Management objectives are centered on meeting service objectives and the system-wide factors that inhibit completing the schedule. However, factors that are just as important to the rider, but under the immediate control of the operators themselves, such as timing of stops, are not tracked to the same level.

The Grand Jury agrees that VTA vehicles were generally clean and well kept. Problems with the bus stops were noted, but the facilities in general were considered good. Driver discourtesy was not seen as a significant problem, and the Back-to Basics Program is spotlighting any concerns in this area.

Information on VTA schedules and standard services was readily available, as was information on programs, such as airport or arena shuttles. Line-specific schedules were available on vehicles ridden by the Grand Jury. However, information on where to make a complaint, complaint forms or information on obtaining special services was more difficult to obtain.

The VTA staff responsible for processing customer complaints was observed by the Grand Jury to be committed to the responsibility. Service complaints are resolved and responses are returned to the complainants in a cordial and expedient manner. It appears to the Grand Jury that the CARE database is an excellent tool for tracking complaint assignment and resolution, and has the potential of being an outstanding management source of reports for improving quality of service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2001-2002 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority:

1. Develop and implement strategies to improve passenger security on light rail vehicles. This might include the use of Route Stabilization Teams, as appropriate. (Ref. Finding #2)
2. Request the sheriff's Risk Analysis Division provide a system-wide security analysis. Using the results of this analysis, develop and implement additional strategies for assuring the security of VTA passengers and operators. (Ref. Finding #3)
3. Ensure that each vehicle has a fully operating onboard communications unit before it is allowed to leave the dispatch center. (Ref. Finding #4)
4. Develop and implement an on-time schedule performance measurement for the overall bus and light rail systems or for key high-volume transfer points. Include this measurement in VTA's annual performance report. (Ref. Finding #5)
5. Initiate and maintain a process by which customer complaint statistics and data are consistently utilized to improve VTA performance. (Ref. Findings #6 & 7)
6. Improve light rail station signs and other indicators so that passengers can easily identify stations from within the vehicle, both in advance of and while stopped at the stations. (Ref. Finding #8)

ATTACHMENT CHART

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Except as noted, publications were prepared by the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority as public documents or reports.

1. Adopted Budget Fiscal Year 2001-2002, July 2001
2. Santa Clara County Transit Authority Personnel Policy and Procedures Manual, policies No. 020, Recruitment and Selection, no date
3. Valley Transportation Plan 2002 (VTP 2002), December 2000
4. VTA Risk Management Summary of Employee Safety Program, a special report prepared for the Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury, March 2002
5. VTA Short Range Transit Plan FY 2001 – 2011, (no date)
6. VTA Transit Service Plan Fiscal Year 2001 – 2002, April 2001

PASSED and **ADOPTED** by the Santa Clara
County Civil Grand Jury this 6th day of June
2002.

Bruce E. Capron
Foreperson

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