

SMART picks heavy cars for Marin-Sonoma rail system

By Mark Prado

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Marin and Sonoma train passengers will ride heavy diesel trains linking the two counties when service is scheduled to start in 2014.

The decision on train type was made Wednesday by the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit board, which is planning the voter-approved 71-mile Cloverdale-to-Larkspur line.

Initially, SMART was looking exclusively at American-style heavy diesel-powered cars for its system, but the rail board believed the lighter European models provided a better ride for passengers.

In order to use the lighter cars, SMART would have to obtain a waiver from the Federal Railroad Administration because freight will also run on sections of the SMART track. The lighter diesel-powered cars are considered not as safe by the railroad administration when running with freight. The heavy cars burn more cleanly than the lighter models.

The board voted 9-2 at its meeting in Santa Rosa for the heavy cars, with board members Marin Supervisor Judy Arnold and Novato Councilwoman Madeline Kellner opposed, saying they liked the design and feel of the lighter vehicles.

"This is the vehicle we promised the voters," said Marin Supervisor Charles McGlashan, SMART board president. "It gets our service up and running on time, on budget and with room to expand for the

future. In the long run, that means our greenhouse gas savings will be even greater."

Board member San Rafael Mayor Al Boro said he didn't want to select the light vehicle and then have to seek a special

exemption to run it.

"Why run that risk and cause possible delays?" he said. "The heavy train gives us a better chance to meet the 2014 timeline we promised voters."

SMART has set aside \$88 million for the design, construction and delivery of the cars for the system. Unlike traditional trains with huge locomotives pulling long lines of passenger cars, the SMART vehicles will be self-propelled units with the engines likely placed underneath passenger compartments.

That allows for compact trains, generally two cars operating together in a "married pair" that seats about 150 passengers and is about 150 to 170 feet long. SMART's specifications likely will require manufacturers to provide a third car that can be added, increasing the seating capacity to 225.

The board had to decide by Aug. 1 on the type of train to keep the project on schedule. The board will now hire a consultant to put together specifications for the trains and then seek bids.

Development of vehicle specifications, which will include public comment, is expected to be complete by end of March 2010. Bids will be due around Oct. 1, 2010. The first vehicles should arrive in the North Bay for testing on the SMART corridor in fall 2013, with the complete fleet ready for service in fall 2014.

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- Siemens, a German company that makes lighter trains, but has expressed interest in developing heavier trains at its Sacramento manufacturing facility.

- Sumitomo/Nippon Sharyo, a Japanese company developing a train to operate on corridors in conjunction with freight service; it built CalTrain cars that operate on the Peninsula.

- Brookville Equipment Corp. of Brookville, Pa., which primarily builds locomotives, but is interested in getting into the passenger car business.

Contact Mark Prado via e-mail at mprado@marinij.com



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