

Smart Train – Golden Gate Bridge - History Does Repeat Itself.

Tom Engdahl - May 2020



I've been thinking about our community over the past few weeks. This morning I came across an article regarding the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit ('SMART') commuter train receiving funding to extend the train to the Larkspur Ferry Terminal. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to enter a discussion with others on social media about the Novato Downtown train station, and the newly completed downtown bus station. This got me thinking about history and wondering what our beautiful City of Novato and the amazingly successful County of Marin would be like if the Golden Gate Bridge had never been built.

In the early 1900s, as the design and plans for the Bridge were being developed, a very vocal group opposed to building the Bridge formed a Taxpayers Committee Against Proposed Golden Gate Bonds to fight the passage of the Bond measure required to build the Golden Gate Bridge. (Interestingly, its membership included City Engineer Michael O'Shaughnessy, who, in 1917, had asked Chief Engineer Joseph Strauss to study the feasibility of building a bridge over the Golden Gate). The Commonwealth Club of San Francisco was urging defeat of the Bond measure, as were the Pacific American Steamship Association and the Ship Owners Association of the Pacific Coast, who charged that the Bridge would be a hazard to navigation and would handicap the shipping industry. "...The bridge clearance would prevent the world's great ships from entering San Francisco harbor..." they claimed. Yet, the General Steamship Corporation said ferries running across shipping lanes were a serious navigational menace; and Dollar Steamship Lines, Inc. felt that the "...clearances are quite satisfactory..."

A vicious and widespread word-of-mouth campaign ensued and included slanderous statements such as An enemy fleet could demolish the Bridge and bottle-neck the US fleet. The

Bridge is too technically difficult and cannot be built. It would not stand. It would be vulnerable to earthquakes, high winds, and erosion. The floor of the Golden Gate Strait would not support the weight of the San Francisco pier and tower. The entire project was a hoax and sham. Only fools would buy Bonds for a bridge certain to fall. Taxpayers would suffer and would have to continue paying to finance the fiasco.

Eventually, Unions, civic, trade, and booster organizations stepped up their campaigns to support the Golden Gate Bridge Bond Measure. The Redwood Empire Association promoted tourism in Northern California counties. The California State Automobile Association (CSAA) knew the Bridge would encourage auto sales. And thus, the Bridge was built.

The Golden Gate Bridge now stands as one of the wonders of the world and is indelibly linked, as an icon, to the City of San Francisco.

History does seem to continue to repeat itself.

Returning to the SMART train, opposition to this transit commuter project has been similarly vicious over the past few years. A widespread word-of-mouth campaign has ensued, including slanderous statements such as The SMART train will fail because no one will commute to work on the train. SMART management is incompetent, so the train will never be built. Funding for the train will harm retired people via tax hikes. The train is dangerous and is bound to kill people. My personal favorite, "...What about all the homeless people that live on the side of the railroad track? Now they will have nowhere to go; Santa Rosa is filled with all these people everywhere with nothing..." (actual quote from a blog post).

The downtown Novato bus depot faced the same type of similar opposition: The depot is too big. Bus drivers consider crisscrossing a danger. The design will not keep people from the elements. Crossing the street with the signal lights will cause accidents. The bus depot will require the removal of Redwood Trees. The bus depot will cost the City valuable tax dollars, which should be used for other, ostensibly more critical, City projects. Of course, none of these dire assertions were true; the downtown bus depot has been built and is a beautiful addition to the Novato downtown landscape.

Just like the Bridge, the SMART Train was built. Although it is a much smaller icon than the Golden Gate Bridge, it is a fantastic transportation and environmental tribute to the leadership and foresight of both Marin and Sonoma Counties.

Imagine if the Golden Gate Bridge had not been built...would our beloved Marin and Sonoma Counties have flourished? Would ferry boats alone have been able to transport the 40-odd million vehicles now crossing the Bridge each year? Marin and Sonoma now have a transportation system that can grow and provide millions of people with safe and environmentally sound transportation for future generations.

Oh, and by the way, On November 4, 1930, voters within the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District's six members, (San Francisco, Marin, Sonoma, Del Norte, and portions of Napa and Mendocino) went to the polls on the question of whether to put up their homes, their farms and their business properties as collateral for a \$35 million Bond issue to finance the

construction of the Golden Gate Bridge. For some, the timing of the Bond election was considered economically reckless as it would create bonded indebtedness during the Great Depression. Others said bridge construction represented the economic relief needed from the Great Depression. After the vote, it was clear that the people believed in Chief Engineer Joseph Strauss' vision – 145,057 voted in favor and 46,954 against.

The vocal opposition is not a new phenomenon in the Bay Area. The next time you cross the Golden Gate Bridge, remember that if the opposition prevailed, Marin County might not have become one of California's most wonderful places to live. I'm looking forward to watching how the Smart Train improves our lives.

Thank goodness common sense tends to prevail.