When you do something twice every day, you begin to notice things. Like 34,000 other commuters, I ride Caltrain daily between San José and San Francisco. I am grateful to have this option, especially since the advent of the Baby Bullet train last year reduced my punishing 120-mile round trip drive to two one-hour trips. It’s even a decent alternative to my EV-1 electric car, which GM spirited away three years ago. With mobile wireless access on the way, Caltrain will get even better.

So what I am about to say is an effort to enhance a fundamentally good system. Caltrain needs to improve its rider relations. The peninsula train system has two problems interfacing with its riders. The first is lack of information. When a new parking system goes into effect at Caltrain stations, as it did earlier this year, involving machines in the stations and numbered stalls, no signs, conductor announcements or any other information clues riders in to how the system works. Do you put your parking receipt in your car, as in the old system? Carry it with you? No one explains, and no one in the stations or on the trains seems to know.

When a train schedule is thrown off – as is periodically the case when a car, or even sadder, people are hit on the tracks – little information is provided to the riders. On a recent morning, the northbound Baby Bullet hit an empty car on the tracks just south of downtown Palo Alto. The train came to a halt at the California Avenue station, and the conductor announced, “Everybody off, this train is returning to San José.” Several hundred befuddled passengers debarked, asking, “So what do we do now?” and looking for information about how to continue their journey onward. The conductor replied, “I have no idea.” Should the passengers wait for another northbound train, return to San José, take a bus to the Palo Alto station? The Caltrain crew shrugged their shoulders. Finally, groups of passengers made a guess, hiked up to El Camino Real and took VTA buses to the downtown Palo Alto station. From there we caught a northbound train.

“When it’s training their crews need, then it’s time for that to happen.”