

CALTRAIN

DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY President and CEO



Photo of Caltrain by John Zipperer

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

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

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 asked about the inability to answer riders’ questions, Caltrain crews complain that they receive no training on how to deal with new procedures like the parking system,

and no information to pass along to passengers when there is a diversion from normal routes or schedules for the train.

The second issue is more one of tone than substance. On Caltrain, riders are greeted with a litany of overly negative and inconsistent announcements. Keep your feet off the seats; that means sock feet and bare feet, too. Cell phone use is prohibited on the train (it isn’t). Use your cell phone if you must but keep the calls short and the setting on vibrate. Get your 10-ride tickets stamped before boarding the train, or you will be fined and forced to appear in court. You may think you can talk the judge out of it, but he’s not going to listen to you. No plucking, painting or combing on board the train. Now is the time to shut down your laptop computers because we’re approaching our final destination.

The message I receive from this litany of negativism is that Caltrain regards its passengers as a bunch of poorly behaved children. In fact, in my observation, most Caltrain riders are highly educated technology workers, who don’t tend to dodge paying to ride the train and may need to use their cell phones for business purposes – as Japanese workers do continuously on Japan’s business-friendly trains.

Especially with the high price of gas, concerns about climate change and lost hours of productivity due to traffic congestion around the Bay Area, we should be making the experience of riding mass transit as pleasant as possible. So I fantasize about a Caltrain announcement that would go something like this:

“Welcome to Caltrain, the historic commuter system serving the peninsula since 1863. We are so pleased to have you aboard. Thanks for doing your part to help reduce air pollution and traffic jams around the Bay Area. Let us know if we can do anything to make your trip more pleasant. This is your commuter rail system, so please help us to keep your shiny trains clean. Your fares help us to keep Caltrain on the tracks. Please be considerate of your fellow passengers as you talk to your neighbors and use your cell phones. We appreciate your continued support of Caltrain.”

Those who fly Southwest Airlines know that transporting people can be accomplished with humor and goodwill, leaving passengers upbeat at the end of the journey and the entity that transports them with a tidy profit. Caltrain could do the same, and if it’s training their crews need, then it’s time for that to happen. Ω