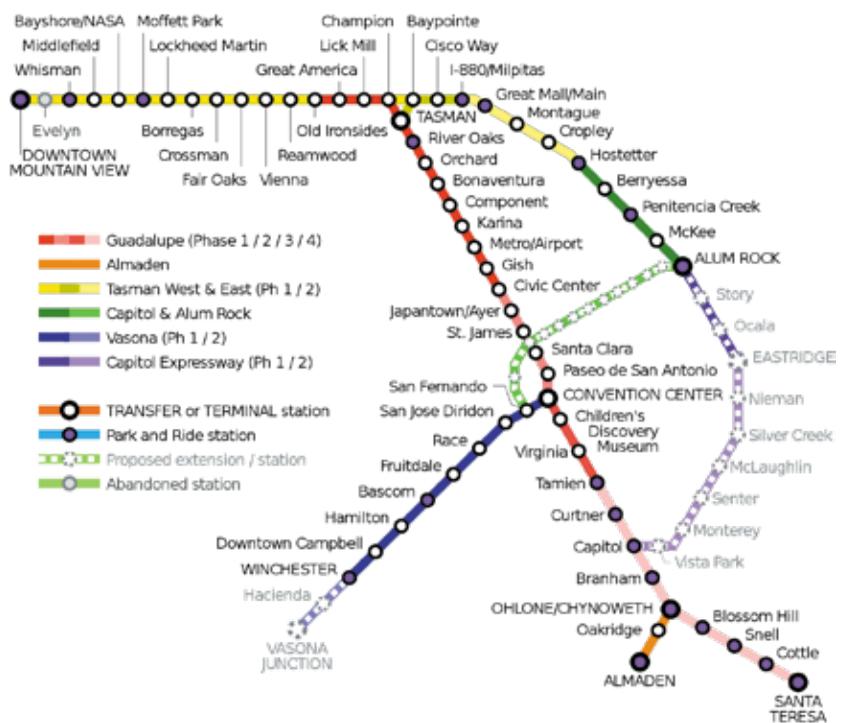


# VIEWPOINT

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor

## GUEST COMMENTARY

# FINISH THE VTA SYSTEM!



SANTA CLARA VALLEY TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

BY ROD DIRIDON SR.  
Guest contributor

The atrocious loss of nine Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority staffers to gun violence early this summer recently brought back the importance of Silicon Valley's public transit system.

Additionally, losing access to light rail and having the overall system disrupted for nearly two months so far has been devastating both to commerce and the community's emotions. The impact would have been multiple times worse had the Covid-19 pandemic not forced so many to telecommute.

There had been talk that the system would be up and running by Aug. 1. But the VTA is continuing a methodical analysis of what to do with the railyard where the deadly attack took place, and how to ensure its employees have all the resources they need.

While movement toward getting the trains up and running is welcome news, it's important to remember that the light rail system in place now is only partially completed.

You have to go back to 1972, when the VTA was known as the Santa Clara County Transit Agency, and the goal was to create a carefully integrated transit

master plan for a dispersed but rapidly growing population.

Four years later, with a plan in hand, voters approved the state's first, permanent half-cent sales tax for transit as a way to fund the system. Every four years after that, the plan was readjusted and reapproved by voters, envisioning a gradual shift to transit as the backbone commute provider.

The plan sustained the highway system, but also began developing a multimodal transit network focused on commuters. And vital to that plan was the light rail, which would help connect to regional rail services and to Amtrak.

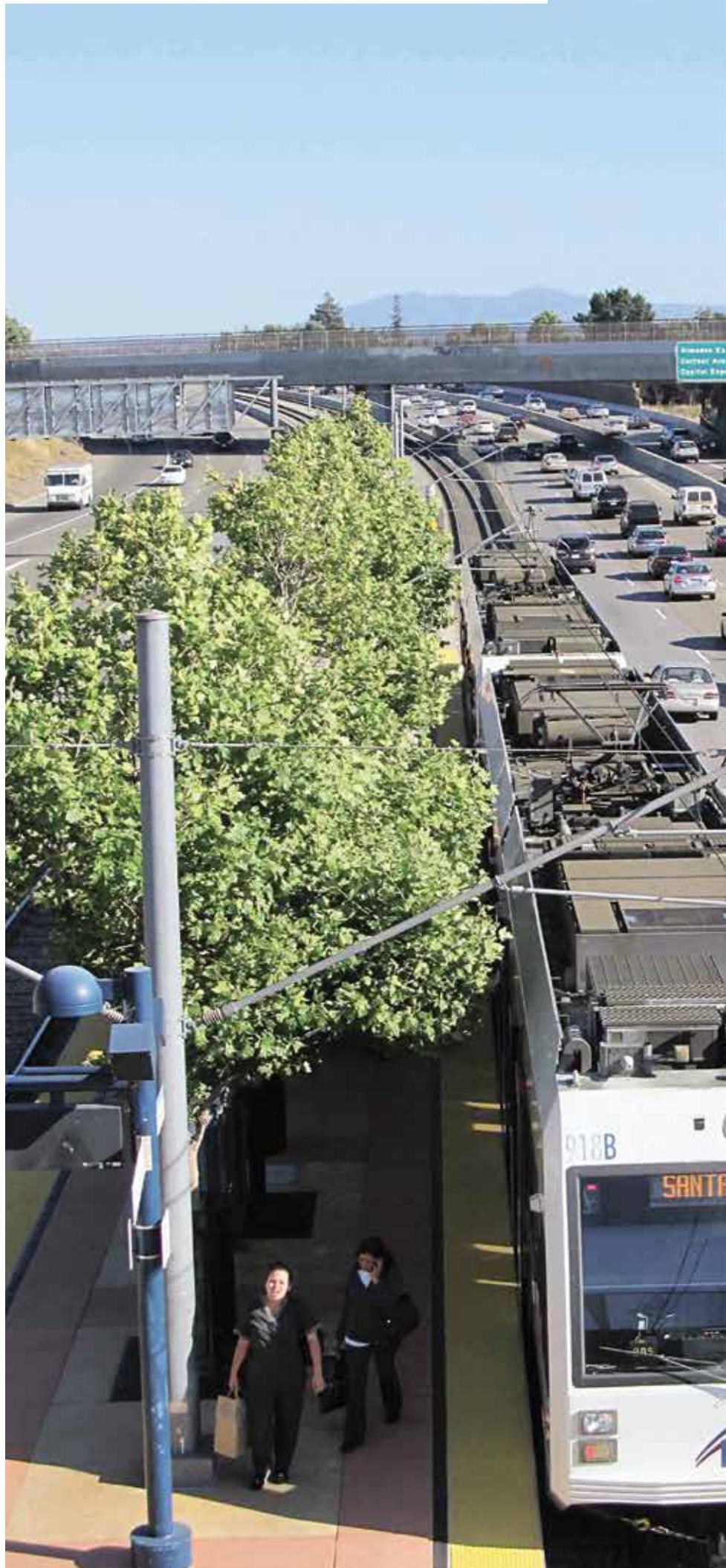
The thinking was to create a light rail commute loop hastening riders from home to work and back around the housing-rich perimeter of the valley while taking a spoke in or out of the loop to major destinations. The starter was the 1982 Guadalupe Corridor, which was really two spokes from the yet-to-be-built north and south loop accessing downtown San Jose, which was projected to grow dramatically.

But a transit line, if built only halfway to a destination, will not carry many riders. Drivers will take a highway part way and shift to community streets for the remainder until the limited roadway capacity is gridlocked.

Today, the 42.2-mile light

◀ The VTA's light-rail system is a work in progress. This map (date unknown) shows the current system and previous proposed extensions.

▶ A VTA light rail train stops at the Virginia Station in the median of State Route 87 in San Jose.



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JODY MEACHAM



TOMAS OVALLE

▲ Rod Diridon Sr. (right) is a former chairman of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and Transit Board, Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission, The American Public Transit Association, and the National Research Council's Transit Cooperative Research Board. With him is his wife, Gloria Duffy, who is president and CEO of the Commonwealth Club of California.

rail system has several lines completed, but it doesn't seamlessly connect the bedrooms of the east, south and west valley with the employment concentrations of the north valley.

A planned light rail commute loop along Tasman and Capitol expressways on the north and east side was begun. But the Capitol link along the lower east and south sides across to the State Route 85 corridor, then through the west side back to Tasman in Mountain View, remains incomplete. Half of a system just will not work.

The villain in this story is a lack of funding caused by never-ending project delays, state and federal gas tax shortfalls, a decision to prioritize BART's extension into Santa Clara County.

BART is an important element of the overall system and was supported by most of us. But because of massive inflation from two decades of delay, BART has become horrendously expensive. As mentioned, half a line was not tenable, so once started, the whole Fremont to San Jose/Santa Clara line had to be completed.

The result: VTA's capital and operating funds have been depleted by the voracious but necessary BART project. The unavoidable result is delay in the completion of VTA's multimodal system and cuts in

operating funds requiring service reductions. Covid's recent impact has hurt, but that is temporary.

Santa Clara County's transit agency now is tempted to reduce the scope of the overall projected system to fit its restricted funding. That would be a terrible mistake as the Silicon Valley economy comes roaring back after the pandemic. Remember that we are building a system for this century and beyond. The region will fail permanently, like Detroit did, unless we can move employees to work and product to market for the long term.

Light rail systems similar to the one here operate superbly in Phoenix, San Diego, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Portland, Seattle, Calgary, Edmonton, and many other growth areas. But we must build it all, the total system, updated to fit the future Silicon Valley need, using the best transit technology.

The first step is to update the system's design with a full environmental clearance, with heavy public input. These are needed to assure the use of the best routes and technology.

The second step, simultaneously with the first, is to work with state and federal transportation departments to have shovel-ready projects prepared to receive the new carbon disincentive fees via job stimulus infrastructure

programs proposed by both Gov. Gavin Newsom and President Joe Biden. Former VTA GM Nuria Fernandez, being Biden's proposed Federal Transit Administrator, will surely help.

If done correctly – and if Congress will first pass any proposal from the Biden administration – carbon disincentive fees on the extraction, import, refining, transport, and use of petroleum and coal would create hundreds of billions of dollars nationally that should be invested to fight climate change.

With new electric or hybrid buses, VTA's rapidly evolving all-electric transit system is a perfect sustainability success story. Electric-powered transit is the nation's best antidote for a carbon addiction. VTA can take the lead, providing mobility and fighting climate change, if we have the foresight and courage to join the world's epic shift to sustainability. The economic future of our Valley and the viability of life on earth could well be at stake. 🚧

Rod Diridon Sr. is the chairman of the the Silicon Valley Ethics Roundtable. A longtime advocate for public transit and environmental policies, Diridon served five terms on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and was its chairman six times.