

Valley Transportation Authority:
Struggle to Improve Public Transit

An Essay

Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

by

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Introduction

The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (V.T.A) was created in 1972 with the purpose of overseeing the transportation system within the county, and ever since, it has been working meticulously, overcoming many obstacles, to improve traveling conditions and air quality. By operating and maintaining the bus and light rail system, it has been able to drastically reduce traffic congestion. It also improved highways and land use planning. Despite the V.T.A.'s extensive effort, however, thousands of Santa Clara County citizens are still driving to work and not taking full advantage of the vast public transportation system available everyday to the valley's residents.

History of the Valley Transportation Authority

In 1972, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors saw a need for change in the transportation system of the county because the process of putting plans to work was just too slow. They saw a need for organization and more effective planning, so they created the Valley Transportation Authority (V.T.A) on June 6, 1972. V.T.A.'s primary responsibility ever since its establishment has been operating and maintaining the bus and light rail system within the county.

Back then, the agency was called the Santa Clara County Transit District (SCCTD). SCCTD was formed out of several different companies including San Jose City Lines and Peninsula Lines. They also bought out local service from Greyhound and Peerless. In 1974, SCCTD management merged with the Santa Clara County Public Works department to create the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency (SCCTA), and Dial-A-Ride started throughout the county. In 1975, Measure B passed providing SCCTD with a 1/2% sales tax for general funding.¹ Light Rail started its first revenue service in 1987. In 1989, the Loma Prieta Earthquake closes Highway 17, and emergency bus service was put in place. One of these routes became the Highway 17 Express. Five percent service cuts due to

budget shortfall caused by reduced sales tax revenue occurred in 1992, and ten percent service cuts happened in 1993.²

In order to be more effective and have more control, V.T.A. decided to separate from the County of Santa Clara and merge with the Congestion Management Agency in January 1995. At that point, V.T.A. assumed the additional responsibility of managing the county's blueprints for reducing congestion and improving air quality. Through a combination of capital improvements in highway and transit, reducing demand on the transportation, and improving land use planning, this reduction is being accomplished.

Currently, V.T.A. runs under the direction of a twelve-member Board of Directors. Annually, the operating budget of V.T.A is \$203 million, which is mainly used to maintain the vast public transportation system.³ This system has a bus fleet of 460 buses that serve a 350-square-mile urbanized service area.⁴ The twenty-one-mile rail system is operated with a fleet of fifty rail cars. With such an extensive network of buses and rail cars, about 2,100 employees are needed to keep it running.⁵

Buses

V.T.A. offers a very flexible and convenient bus system with routes going to almost any part of the county. These routes serve main streets, residential areas, shopping, schools, employment areas, and other businesses. Approximately eighty percent of Santa Clara County residents are within a quarter mile of a transit route. During regular operating hours, waits between buses are only about fifteen to thirty minutes long.

Besides the conventional local buses, there are buses that go beyond city and county limits called Express buses. V.T.A. operates Express bus routes linking residential areas of the county with Silicon Valley industrial centers. Major employers work with V.T.A. to develop and refine commuter services. In addition, regional Express Route 180 provides daily service connecting Caltrain, Downtown San Jose, and Milpitas with BART in Fremont.

For people who have cars and who want to use Express buses or light rail, V.T.A. provides Park and Ride lots. All Park and Ride lots may be used as convenient meeting points for carpool and vanpool passengers and most have Express Bus routes going by. Many lots have special features such as passenger shelters, transit schedule signs, and bicycle lockers.

Along with free usage of Park and Ride lots, V.T.A. provides free

shuttle buses for all San Jose Arena events. The shuttle serves downtown San Jose, including light rail stations and parking garages. V.T.A. also provides bus service to weekend 49er home football games. Several Park and Ride lots are designated pick-up locations for direct service to 3COM (Candlestick) Park.

Light Rail

The County of Santa Clara has a very special light rail system. Not only does it go through the heart of San Jose, but also it is one of the longest light rail lines to be built in the United States in over fifty years. The process to build the light rail was not easy though. There were many opponents such as taxpayers and private transportation agencies. One of the main supporters of the project who got it underway was Rod Diridon, a member of the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors at that time.

Light Rail service began in December 1987. The whole track was completed in segments. The initial nine-mile segment from Santa Clara through downtown San Jose was completed in June 1988. Service to the Tamien Station (Alma Avenue), two miles south of downtown, began in August 1990. The 20.8-mile line was completed in April 1991.⁶ This route was chosen because it was the most convenient and met the demands of a significant number of commuters.

This light rail system consists of thirty-four stations. Each station has rail cars traveling in both directions. There is free, lighted parking for almost six thousand cars at eleven park and ride lots. Light rail service connects with V.T.A. buses at all stations. Service is operated twenty-four hours a day with ten, fifteen, and thirty-minute frequencies.

There are a total of fifty vehicles in the light rail fleet. Each is equipped with heating and air conditioning and features four doors on each side. The cars are eighty-eight feet and six inches in length, and they weigh ninety-nine thousand pounds.⁷ Each car can hold up to sixty-seven people seated and ninety-two people standing. Their maximum speed on freeway median is fifty-five miles per hour. At Downtown Center Plaza, they travel only ten miles per hour. In addition, cars are equipped with two wheelchair tie-downs. Disabled passenger lifts are also available at all stops, and ticket information is provided in Braille.

All this building and extra features cost a lot of money, which caused considerable criticism from taxpayers. With each major improvement, the cost to riders increased to compensate for the service. The twenty-mile light rail line was \$502,900,000. The fourteen-block transit mall was \$45,100,000. Each light rail vehicle is \$1,000,000.⁸

Currently, there is a dispute about adding on to the light rail line. The debated five-mile segment is called the Vasona Line. There are two route proposals: one to go through San Fernando Street and one to go through Delmas Avenue. V.T.A. recommends the Delmas Avenue route proposal because it does not disrupt utility services, but nearby Parkside residents call it a potential threat to the neighborhood. Merchants and other members of

the San Jose Downtown Association support this proposal because it does not interfere with the business in downtown San Jose.

Special Projects

Besides the normal bus and light rail system, V.T.A. has tried many approaches to get commuters to use public transportation. It has come up with special offers and programs throughout the years which have helped to attract riders.

For parents who have work and no time to take care of their children, V.T.A. built the Tamien Child Care Center in November 1995. It is located at the Tamien Caltrain and Light Rail Stations, near Highway 87 and Alma Avenue in San Jose. It is ideal for parents because they can park their car, drop off kids, and go to work using the light rail or Caltrain services. It accommodates 126 children from six weeks through twelve years.⁹

For employees and employers, there are Eco Passes. Eco Pass is good for unlimited use of V.T.A. Bus and Light Rail services, seven days a week. Paratransit services for people with disabilities are also covered by Eco Pass. Here's how Eco Pass works: employers purchase annual stickers for their company I.D. badges (or V.T.A.-produced photo I.D. cards) for all employees at one low cost. Their employees use the pass for unlimited free rides on any V.T.A. Bus or Light Rail Line. Leading companies employing nearly 40,000 Silicon Valley workers signed up for Eco Pass in the

program's first year.¹⁰ Transit ridership at these participating companies has as much as doubled.

Bikes can be carried on buses and on light rail cars, too. In an effort to make commuting easier for people who bike and ride, V.T.A. has installed new bike lockers throughout its bus and light rail system. V.T.A. now provides 350 bike lockers at light rail and Caltrain stations, Park & Ride lots and transit centers for the use of transit riders. There is no charge for the quarterly bike locker rental. However, there is a twenty-five dollar refundable security deposit required.

V.T.A. operates more than just regular light rail cars. It has started a special project. The California Trolley and Railroad Corporation, a historical restoration project headed by Rod Diridon, is a private, non-profit organization with a Board of Directors composed of local business and community leaders. The corporation was founded in 1982 to fund and direct the restoration of six vintage streetcars, which run on the Downtown Center Plaza. The restoration effort was made possible through donations from the community and the hard work of volunteers. The six fully restored historic trolleys, which date back to 1903, operate between the San Jose Convention Center and Civic Center Stations. V.T.A.'s historic trolleys operate daily from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. from April to early October, weather

permitting. Riders can use their valid Day Pass, Monthly Flash Pass (or sticker) or Eco Pass as acceptable fare on the trolley, or, they can purchase a single ride ticket, which is valid for up to two hours of historic trolley or light rail service.

V.T.A., in cooperation with the Transportation Fund for Clean Air, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and participating employers, operate free shuttle buses from several light rail stations directly to various places of employment.

V.T.A. also encourages carpooling and vanpooling. Carpooling allows passengers to take turns driving, helps cut commute costs and shortens commute time by making use of the Commute (diamond) Lanes. The Valley Transportation Authority sponsors the Santa Clara Valley Diamond Lane Campaign with funding from the Transportation Fund for Clean Air from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. VTA contracts with RIDES for Bay Area Commuters to manage the campaign. For riders who live twenty miles or more from work, vanpooling may be the most economical ridesharing alternative. Vanpool passengers share the costs, while the driver has a free commute.

Controversy

As with all organizations, nothing is perfect. Over the years, V.T.A has encountered a lot of controversy. Usually, it is about their spending on the bus and light rail system, but occasionally, groups other than taxpayers complain. Here are just some of the problems.

On all county buses, there are ads on the sides of the bus and inside the bus. In 1997, an ad's sponsor wanted to make a provocative statement about the needs for AIDS research. It was a good idea, but one of their chosen slogans, "Prayers Won't Cure AIDS. Research Will," provoked controversy with the religious groups.¹¹ The last of them were removed from the sides of a Santa Clara County bus within days.

Another concern is the safety of riders in county buses. In one incident, a Chevrolet Cavalier collided with a V.T.A. bus. The two people in the car were taken to the Valley Medical Center. On the bus, eleven people were injured. Even though it was not the bus driver's fault, this is just another risk of riding on buses.

The quality and experience of bus and light rail drivers and the mechanics are important for the safety of passengers. In 1997, there were eight workers who were reinstated even though they flunked their drug or alcohol tests twice. They were fired, but they were soon back behind the

wheel or under the hood because the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority did not have a valid agreement with the workers' union outlining the possible punishment for anyone failing a drug test. As a result, V.T.A. could not do anything about the workers.¹²

The Tamien Child Care Center is also another issue. It was a clever idea meant to help parents and reduce Santa Clara County's traffic and pollution problems. After fifteen months, the parents say the \$2.5 million Tamien Child Care Center is a nice center, but only about one in five of those using the child care facility also use Caltrain, light rail or buses nearby to commute to work.¹³ The center, some say, is not serving its purpose.

Conclusion

Over the years, participation in public transportation and ridership has drastically increased. According to system data, over the past twenty years, the amount of riders has nearly tripled. There were 15.7 million riders in 1978, and in 1998, there were 46.1 million.¹⁴

The vision of the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority has always been to provide a transportation system that allows anyone to go anywhere in the region easily and efficiently. It wants to provide the public with a safe and efficient countywide transportation system. This system has increased access and mobility, reduced congestion, improved the environment, and supported economic development, thereby enhancing quality of life. Evidently, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority has done its part to improve transit conditions and air quality; now it is our turn.

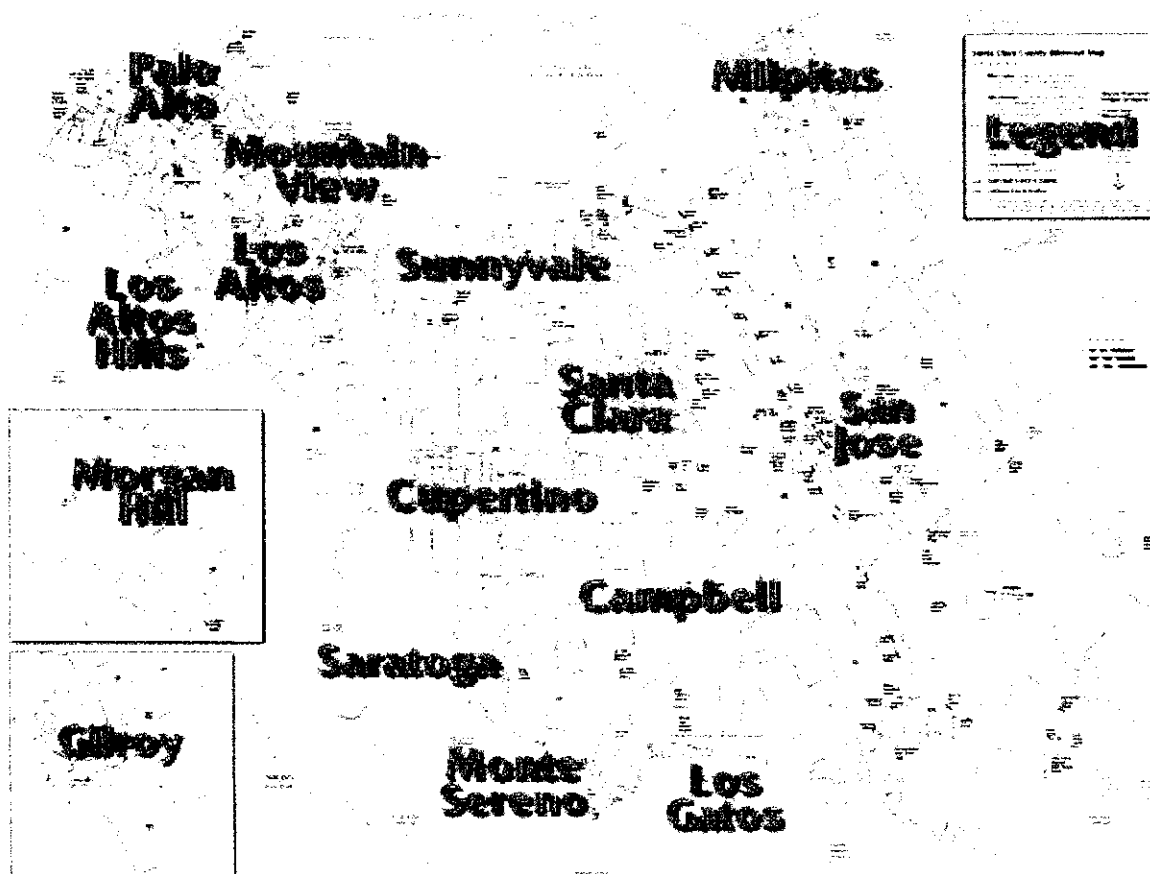
Appendices

Current VTA Logo



This image contains the abbreviation V.T.A. on the left in teal with lower left to upper right teal, white and red slightly curved stripes above it. On the right are the words Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority also in teal with Valley Transportation Authority somewhat enlarged, but smaller than the abbreviation. The background in the image is white.

VTA Coverage of Santa Clara County



Current Bus System Data July 1998

<u>Routes by Category</u>	<u>Total : 74</u>	<u>Deployment Vehicles Scheduled</u>	
Grid -----	15	AM Peak	398
Crosstown -----	24	Midday	269
Regular	18	PM Peak	411
Limited Stop	6	Evenings	90
Feeder -----	23		
Neighborhood	19	Saturday	188
Shuttle	3	Sunday	158
Dial-a-Ride	1		
Express -----	12	Total Active Fleet	509
Commute Express	10	Base/ Peak	65.5%
Regional Express	2		

<u>Level of Service</u>			
County Population	1,653,100		
Urbanized Service Area (Square Miles)	326		
Total Number of Stops	4,352		
Total Number of Shelters	469		
Route Mileage (Round Trip)	2,830		
Park-and-Ride Lots		<u>Bus</u>	<u>Light Rail</u>
Number of Lots		17	10
			6
Number of Parking Spaces		820	5,950
			1,826
			8,596

<u>Historical Data</u>						<u>Contracted/Inter-Agency Services *</u>	
<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Active Fleet</u>	<u>Scheduled Hours</u>	<u>Scheduled Annual Riders Miles</u>	<u>Average Annual Riders (Millions)</u>	<u>Average Weekday</u>	<u>Annual Riders</u>	<u>Average Weekday</u>
1974-75	216	438,595	6,214,285	8.69	31,160		
1975-76	236	614,303	9,066,850	12.78	43,650		
1976-77	236	657,335	9,667,025	15.60	54,800		
1977-78	250	680,351	9,874,025	15.74	54,200		
1978-79	330	744,403	10,974,722	21.00	71,320		
1979-80	410	866,922	13,208,223	27.22	93,690		
1980-81	494	1,071,450	16,121,241	31.66	106,435		
1981-82	654	1,289,275	19,315,699	34.31	114,614		
1982-83	654	1,375,751	20,486,007	34.87	117,921		
1983-84	587	1,393,663	20,709,523	35.75	120,025		
1984-85	542	1,423,306	21,054,147	35.83	121,031		
1985-86	542	1,478,363	21,828,651	37.97	117,218		
1986-87	542	1,523,996	22,743,434	34.16	114,845		
1987-88	526	1,534,980	23,054,441	35.22	118,432		
1988-89	518	1,524,689	22,904,636	36.44	124,958		
1989-90	508	1,539,093	22,983,312	38.69	131,573		
1990-91	512	1,586,495	23,683,679	41.65	141,147		
1991-92	512	1,563,141	23,313,885	40.10	135,375		
1992-93	474	1,437,719	21,544,840	38.94	131,368	632,019	2,267
1993-94	461	1,367,725	20,577,474	38.74	128,581	642,509	2,330
1994-95	460	1,367,258	20,401,172	39.18	130,390	689,930	2,492
1995-96	460	1,371,163	20,452,092	42.63	139,787	759,966	2,763
1996-97	470	1,407,690	20,721,893	45.89	150,224	914,606	3,251
1997-98	509	1,464,965	21,184,989	46.12	150,537	1,050,640	3,717

*Includes Paratransit Service, Light Rail Shuttles, Highway 17 Express and Dumbarton Bridge Express Service. Ridership numbers are based on percentages of originating riders in the YTA service area for Highway 17 Express and Dumbarton Express. Paratransit and Light Rail Shuttles are operated wholly within the service area, therefore, 100% of that ridership is included.

Current Rail System Data

July 1998

<u>Level of Service</u>		
County Population		1,653,100
Urbanized Area (Square Miles)		326
Length of Line		20 miles
Total Number of Stops		34
Route Mileage (Round Trip)		39.0
Miles of Directional Track		41.1
% of Platforms Lift Equipped		100%
Light Rail Park-and-Ride Lots		
Number of Lots		10
Number of Parking Spaces		5,950
Frequency of Service	<u>Weekday</u> <u>Saturday</u> <u>Sunday</u>	
24-Hour Service	Headways 10 mins. 15 mins. 15 mins.	
Active Fleet Size		50
<u>Historic Trolley Fleet</u>	<u>Date Dedicated</u>	
Car 124	November 1988	
Car 129	November 1988	
Car 73	May 1989	
Car 531	January 1990	
Car 1	August 1990	
Car 2001	October 1992	
<u>Guadalupe Line Openings</u>		
Younger St. to Old Ironsides	12/11/87	8 miles
Downtown to Old Ironsides	06/17/88	10 miles
Tamien Station to Old Ironsides	08/17/90	12 miles
Santa Teresa to Old Ironsides	04/25/91	20 miles

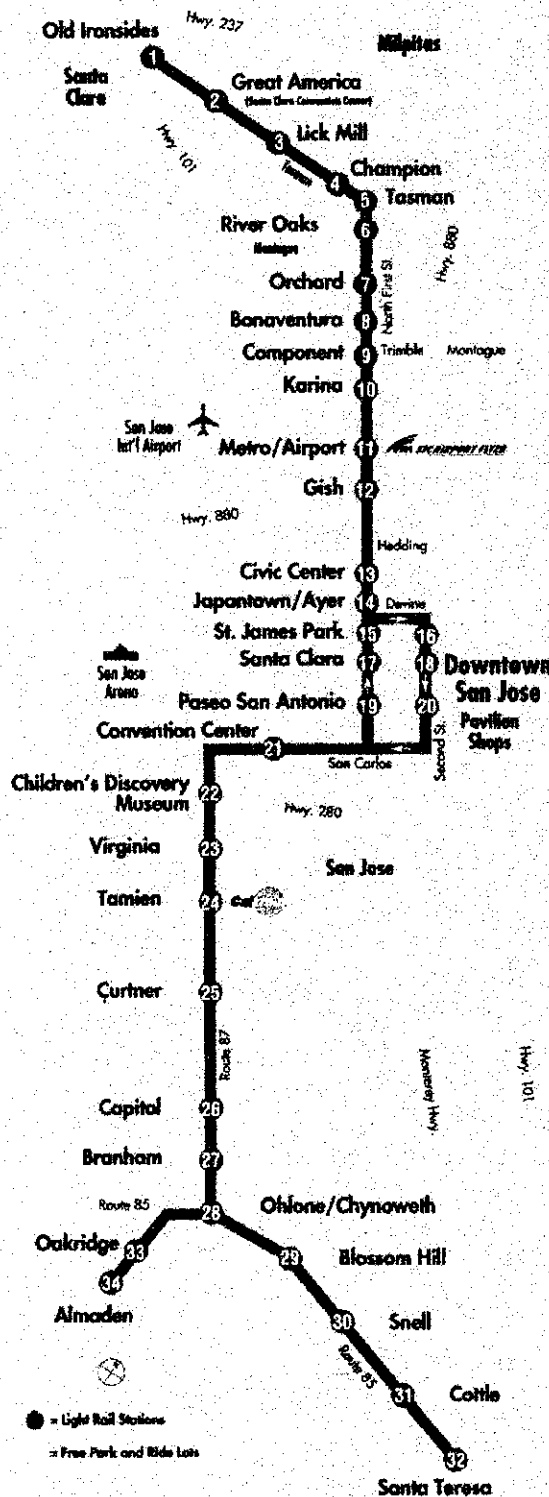
Historical Data

Fiscal Year	<u>Light Rail*</u>		<u>Caltrain**</u>			
	<u>Hours Operated</u>	<u>Miles Operated</u>	<u>Total Passengers</u>	<u>Average Weekday</u>	<u>Total Passengers</u>	<u>Average Weekday</u>
1987-88	16,622	222,329	359,965	1,101	2,683,235	8,613
1988-89	42,665	538,799	2,007,748	6,419	2,642,538	8,540
1989-90	45,378	557,449	2,432,298	8,083	2,414,361	7,236
1990-91	67,424	890,617	4,001,142	12,569	2,720,973	8,133
1991-92	94,191	1,394,480	6,134,759	19,470	2,648,487	7,915
1992-93	85,419	1,283,621	6,245,385	20,082	2,612,377	7,907
1993-94	79,280	1,203,823	6,133,003	19,735	2,630,926	7,929
1994-95	78,632	1,198,107	5,659,319	18,257	2,671,029	8,222
1995-96	82,006	1,274,202	6,168,085	20,146	2,825,219	8,686
1996-97	84,906	1,339,564	6,728,392	22,073	3,048,077	9,412
1997-98	87,286	1,368,228	6,877,733	22,696	3,194,862	9,956

* Includes Historic Trolley

** Caltrain ridership represents the number of trips originating within VTA's service area.

VTA Light Rail Stations—Hotels



- 1 Old Ironsides
- 2 Great America (Santa Clara Convention Center)
- 3 Lick Mill
- 4 Champion
- 5 Tasman
- 6 River Oaks
- 7 Orchard
- 8 Bonaventura
- 9 Component
- 10 Karina
- 11 Metro/Airport
- 12 Gish
- 13 Civic Center
- 14 Japantown/Ayer
- 15 St. James Park
- 16 Santa Clara
- 17 Paseo San Antonio
- 18 Convention Center
- 19 San Carlos
- 20 Children's Discovery Museum
- 21 Virginia
- 22 Tamien
- 23 Curtner
- 24 Capital
- 25 Branham
- 26 Oakridge
- 27 Almaden
- 28 Ohlone/Chynoweth
- 29 Blossom Hill
- 30 Snell
- 31 Cottle
- 32 Santa Teresa
- 33 Oakridge Mall

Free Arena Shuttle

Everytime there's an event at the San Jose Arena, we'll shuttle you free. The VTA Arena Shuttle serves downtown San Jose stops and parking garages, plus the Santa Clara and Paseo de San Antonio Light Rail Stations.

Free Downtown Area Shuttle (DASH)

Getting around downtown San Jose is quick and easy – and free on a VTA Shuttle. The Downtown Area Shuttle (DASH) serves the San Jose Diridon Caltrain Station, the Downtown Center Plaza, the Children's Discovery Museum, the Convention Center and Plaza de San Antonio Light Rail Stations Monday to Friday from 6:15 a.m. to 9:49 a.m., and again from 2:37 p.m. to 6:53 p.m.

Free VTA/SJC Airport Flyer

The VTA/SJC Airport Flyer goes to both terminals of San Jose International Airport everyday from 5:30 a.m. until 11:30 p.m. You can catch that early morning flight out and a late night home-free. The Airport Flyer offers service every 10 minutes on weekdays, every 15 minutes on weekends. Get on board at the Metro/Airport Light Rail Station or the Santa Clara Caltrain Station.

VTA Customer Service
(408) 321-2300

Hearing-Impaired (TDD Only)
(408) 321-2330

Or log on to
www.vta.org

Notes

1. Internet, "<http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Arcade/3217/vta.htm>"
2. Ibid.
3. Shellie Albright, "How to Get a Job with VTA" (VTA, 1999), p. 1.
4. Internet, "http://www.vta.org/TA_Overview.html"
5. Albright, Op. Cit., p.2.
6. Internet, "http://www.vta.org/Light_Rail_Overview.html"
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Internet, "http://www.vta.org/Child_Care.html"
10. Gary Richards, "Why Bus Fares Continue to Increase." San Jose Mercury News. June 30, 1997
11. Barry Witt, "Ads Pulled Off Buses After Complaints." San Jose Mercury News. February 21, 1997.
12. Matt Naumann, "Bus Driver on Drugs? Just Say No Possible Way." San Jose Mercury News. March 13, 1997.
13. Tracy Seipel, "Child Care Falls Short as a Transit Lure." San Jose Mercury News. February 16, 1997.
14. Jeanne B. Perkins, Riding Out Future Quakes (San Francisco: Association of Bay Area Government., 1997), p. 62.

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