

**SAN RAFAEL**

## Differences eased over relocation of transit hub

### Project update addresses concerns of city officials



PHOTOS BY SHERRY LAVARS — MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

A Marin Transit bus stops at the San Rafael Transit Center in San Rafael. The proposed relocation of the center is being considered to address concerns about pedestrian safety and traffic flow.

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After raising red flags last year, San Rafael officials are getting onboard with plans for the San Rafael Transit Center relocation.

Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District officials presented a project update to the San Rafael City Council on Monday, addressing the city's concerns over the draft environmental impact report released in August 2021.

City officials had requested a recirculation of the DEIR, stating misgivings over the use of outdated transportation data, proposals such as loss of parking, the pick-up and drop off location as well as a perceived

lack of compliance with the general plan 2040, among others.

"At this point, things look fine, but we've got some very, very big decisions to make over the next couple of years," said Councilmember Maribeth Bushey, who is running for reelection.

"This is our eastern gateway into San Rafael, and it really should be a goal of the project to have exemplary design," Bushey said.

The new site would include three parcels bordered to the south and north by Third and Fourth streets and to the west and east by Tamalpais Avenue and Hetherton Street, where the Vivalon headquarters and Citibank building are situated.

The relocation project is being considered to address



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concerns about pedestrian safety and traffic flow that have arisen since Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit dis-

trict train tracks were built directly through the transit center in 2019.

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## Transit

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After reviewing and addressing comments received, Adam Dankberg, who is managing the project for the bridge district, said, "We feel that a recirculation of the (draft) EIR is not necessary."

Either the comments went beyond what was required by the California Environmental Quality Act, "or we were able to address in working with city staff through minor revisions" that will be incorporated in the final EIR, he said.

Dankberg said for their analysis they used transit data acquired just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but those numbers are still relevant as ridership numbers are rebounding.

Marin Transit ridership is exceeding 80% of pre-COVID-19 levels, and Golden Gate Transit ridership is at about 42% of pre-COVID. However, Golden Gate's regional bus service, which uses the San Rafael transit center, is back at 80%. It's the commuter lines that are at 20%, which is bringing

down the overall numbers, district officials said.

The draft EIR studied four project alternatives. The preferred alternative being proposed was identified as the best performing alternative based on safety, Dankberg said.

He said in response to comments, the final EIR will include revisions aimed at reducing bicycle and pedestrian conflicts at the pick-up and drop-off site, as well as improving a historically dangerous right turn onto Third and Hetherton streets.

The revisions propose adding 16 new parking spaces on Tamalpais Avenue, among other safety and transportation changes.

Dankberg said the final EIR will be updated to reflect the adopted general plan 2040. Staff concluded the plan is consistent with the city's policies.

Additionally, the bridge district is extending the final EIR review period from 10 to 30 days before presenting to the board for approval to allow the city time study and provide input on the document, Dankberg said.

Denis Mulligan, general manager of the district, said once the EIR is certified by

the district board, staff will start processes for the project design as well as necessary property and right-of-way acquisitions, which is expected to take about two years.

"Then and only then would we actually be able to advertise a construction contract and actually break ground," Mulligan said, adding that construction is estimated to take 12 to 18 months. He anticipates that the new transit center will be operational by 2027.

He said they will work with the city to organize a community design advisory committee that includes transit riders, neighbors to the site and other community members.

The largest property to acquire is the site operated by Vivalon, formerly Whistlestop. The nonprofit that offers services for older adults is in the process of building a new senior services campus at 999 Third St.

Anne Grey, chief executive officer of Vivalon, said construction on that project is expected to be completed in fall of 2023 and the site fully operational in early 2024. She said she supports the plans for the new tran-

sit center.

"This beloved building has been providing connection to the older community for decades," Grey said. "The new transit center will be offering connection to the community in the future, including for our members, so I think it's a beautiful use of the building."

Councilmember Eli Hill, who is also up for reelection, said he is appreciative of the district's work with city staff in addressing the issues.

"At least on face value, and the presentation, it looks like all of our concerns were conceptually addressed," Hill said.

Mayor Kate Colin said that at the project update meeting last year she felt that "we're going to have to start rebuilding some trust to get on the same page," but this meeting was different, "and I'm happy about that."

"I'm really grateful to you all," she told bridge district officials, noting that it was evident they collaborated with the city staff.

Paolo Cosulich-Schwartz, district spokesperson, said planners are aiming to publish the final EIR at bit.ly/3Sbnn3H by early next week.