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BART Solar Project at the Lafayette Station

By Cathy Tyson

Looking to garner public input, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Director Gail Murray and Frank Schultz, Manager of BART's Energy Division, made a presentation on the benefits of a potential solar canopy above the eastern section of the Lafayette BART parking lot recently at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. This is just a preliminary step in the process - approval by the BART Board of Directors will be required before going forward. If approved, construction would start in 2012.

"We want to diversify our power supply," said Schultz. With the lowest climate change emissions per passenger of large urban transit systems in the nation, BART is looking for a reliable and renewable clean energy source that supports their sustainability goals.

The Lafayette station was chosen after BART performed a comprehensive study of locations. Originally Orinda was considered, but those plans were partially scrapped after discussions with the City. BART agreed to put plans on hold at that station while Orinda wrestles with its General Plan - they compromised on a smaller installation on the parking section nearest the station.

The Northern California Power Agency, a joint-powers agency with BART and other local government members, looked for an experienced operator of energy projects and after review, decided on LightBeam Energy to construct and manage the project. LightBeam plans, develops and operates renewable power generation facilities, "We put generation where the load is," said Light Beam President Jim Lavelle.

He went on to explain that California has made renewable power more attractive and BART is responding to those incentives. The long term cost is expected to be about the same as the conventional supply. If approved, the Lafayette solar panel array is expected to produce 750 kilowatts of energy - that would take care of the entire energy needs of the Lafayette station and then some.

LightBeam is financing the entire project; Lowell describes his firm as a "new age utility company" - that is getting more and more pervasive as demand continues to grow.

The benefit to BART parkers, aside from supporting renewable energy, is a shady spot to park and significantly better night time lighting. The shades will be slightly angled to maximize solar absorption and stand approximately nine feet tall.

In addition, drivers should be aware that travel by BART is eleven times cleaner than driving alone in your car. Residents in attendance voiced concerns about loss of parking spaces - and aesthetics. One woman called it "unattractive - it looks like a cheap carport." The project's next step is Design Review; perhaps they can make it more attractive.

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