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Press Democrat Reporter

As a fourth generation Sonoma County resident and family business owner I have deep roots in this community. What happens here and the direction it takes is of intense concern to me. When my father was approached by a SMART board member for a donation to fund a poll on ridership, and with the related tax measure coming up on the March ballot, I was curious to learn more myself. Thus began the work of looking into the facts of how SMART is doing.

Since its inception, SMART has been resistant to constructive measures. Following a 2010 Marin grand jury report, SMART disagreed with 13 findings of the report and rejected 7 of 8 of the report recommendations designed to improve the financial oversight and communication with the public. Over the next 9 years, SMART's poor, unchecked performance continued. Measure I allows SMART to spend billions more in tax revenue without any budget oversight nor any commitment to extend the line or improve service. Voting YES on Measure I would be like signing a huge blank check for an additional 30 years.

In 2008 Measure Q passed with promises to the public of a 71-mile train, 71-mile bike path, rail service beginning in 2014, and shuttle service to and from rail stations that would transport thousands of riders per day and relieve traffic on 101. Eleven years later, SMART has only completed 45 miles of rail and 18.4 miles of the bike path, and now says it does not have the funds to finish. Measure I would extend the tax another 30 years, to 2059, so SMART can refinance their current debt and lower payments for six years, but raise them for 24 years thereafter. Extending the tax 30 years equates to asking the public for $2.4 billion dollars in additional taxes, with none of those funds allocated towards constructing rail north of Windsor nor completing the promised bike path.

Apart from the failure to complete significant portions of their service route, recent data shows less than 1/8 of 1% of the public uses SMART. In comparison, the percentage of the public riding BART is 30 times higher and 8 times higher for Golden Gate Transit.

The argument that "SMART is in its infancy" and will miraculously start making sense from a massive influx of new riders is not supported by any data. BART increased ridership by 204% in its second year, and another 99% more in year three. SMART ridership actually decreased in its second year, showing the opposite trend. Our family business was founded on residential construction so we are acutely aware of the slow growth political culture that exists in Sonoma County. There is no indication that this will change in the future, so the suggestion that ridership will increase from increased local population is specious.

SMART claims that its diesel trains lower greenhouse gas emissions. We know of only one serious examination of this question- recent analysis done by Richard Harkness, a local transportation and greenhouse gas expert with a Ph.D. in Urban Systems Planning. His study shows that SMART's trains are emitting more CO_2 than if all SMART's riders took cars and Golden Gate Transit buses instead.

Aside from its broken promises and unsubstantiated environmental claims, SMART is a financial disaster. The current tax runs through 2029, and currently covers 90% of SMART's operating expenses (excluding debt service), making SMART one of the worst performing trains in our country. To put this into perspective, for every roundtrip, taxpayers are subsidizing $100 of the cost, and for every 2 riders on SMART there are 1,000 non-riders paying for 90% of the cost. To rub salt in the wound, according to SMART's own data, the average rider on SMART makes an annual income of $97,000.

SMART's financial projections are a hoax. Their 2008 Expenditure Plan, published with the 2008 tax measure, estimated the annual operating cost for the train was $17.1 million. In reality, for 2020 the operating cost for just the 45-mile train will be $41.3 million and grow 3% per year thereafter. This means the average annual cost to operate the train over the next 40 years will be $85 million per year- 600% of the original estimate.

For those who operate in the private sector, failing to deliver on a contract obligation has grave consequences. If I failed to make payments on a home loan, or my family construction company signed a contract to build a 5-bedroom home but delivered a 3-bedroom home instead, the results would be swift and painful. The taxpayers, with their vote to fund SMART, entered into a contract with this public agency expecting delivery of certain promises. They deserve to know that these promises have not been met and will not be met.

I was raised in a family culture that emphasized fiscal responsibility, a high work ethic, integrity, and respect for everyone regardless of their station in life. I witnessed my parents giving to our community in different ways as I was growing up. I have 3 siblings that were adopted and my parents founded, funded, and ran a non-profit adoption agency that placed children with local families. After the October 2017 fires, in which both my parents and I lost our own homes, we made the decision to restart a residential construction arm, dormant for decades, to rebuild lost homes in Coffey Park, from which all the profits have been donated to local concerns. Over the years my parents have made significant and ongoing donations to the Windsor Boys and Girls Club and to the Redwood Empire Foodbank. They just gifted the funds to the Boys and Girls Club of Sonoma-Marin to buy a piece of land in Roseland, and are in process to build and gift a new club for the more than 1,000 children in the local neighborhood there who are in dire need of a safe place to go after school. These are choices my parents have made as their businesses have grown and prospered. I was fortunate to walk into an already thriving company so now have discretionary funds at my own disposal and am faced with my own decisions on how to give back.

Contributing to the community at large is something I see as both a privilege and an obligation. There have been dozens of letters to the editor in the Press Democrat and the Marin IJ criticizing the mess (lack of transparency, fiduciary irresponsibility) that the SMART Board has landed us in. My background in banking has given me an acute understanding of just how bad a situation SMART has built for themselves. My financial resources allow me to speak up in a public way to address these concerns. If I end up spending $1 million to save our community taxpayers from a $2.4 billion mistake then I feel it is worth every penny. There is a limit to how many tax measures can be supported, and freeing up to $2.4 billion for infinitely better uses creates a community benefit that cannot be ignored. We have dire needs in this community that beg immediate attention, action and funds. Our homeless population, increasing for many years, is at a crisis point. We have a severe housing shortage that has also been in the making for decades. Our community leaders seem unable or unwilling to address these pressing issues that affect all of us. How much could be done to help each of these issues if billions of dollars in funding were shifted from running empty trains into supportive programs for housing and mental health? Is SMART really something we can afford to spend more money on? We are asking the SMART board to operate within the budget that was projected.

Sincerely,

Molly Gallaher Flater