

Napa Valley Register

Locals working on creative traffic solutions

November 2, 2015 • BY DAVID STONEBERG

Everyone talks about Napa Valley's traffic problems. The speakers at Thursday's Napa Valley Vintners' Local Leaders Tour talked of solutions.

Calistoga Mayor Chris Canning, for example, spoke about a closed loop private employees' shuttle program that will begin next May.

Danielle Schmitz from the Napa County Transportation and Planning Agency talked about two aspects of transportation: Changes in bus routes that have led to an increase of ridership by 20 percent; and the Napa Valley Vine Trail, which will soon include 12 miles of continuous trail, from Oak Knoll to Kennedy Park in Napa.

David Morrison of the county's Planning, Building and Environmental Services Department spoke about the county redoing its circulation element and how the state has changed the way it looks at traffic, in regard to project funding.

Keynote speaker Dr. Susan Handy, from the Institute of Transportation Studies from UC Davis, said that she has "no magic solutions," but instead offered the group of 85 people "food for thought" that included several solutions in use throughout the United States.

"It is futile to think about traffic by eliminating traffic, rather

we need to give people alternatives to driving cars,” she said. The “old way” of designing cities was to “make it easier to drive,” while she recommended a “new way” that makes it easier not to drive and to focus efforts on livability.

The group gathered at Napa’s City Winery.

Canning said Calistoga’s biggest business challenge is availability of workers. In his role as executive director of the Calistoga Chamber of Commerce, he and two others, Larry Arnoff, a consultant for 35 years who is now retired, and Brian Moore, a former CEO of RidePal, a ride sharing service, have been working on the Employee Shuttle Program (ESP.)

“How do we get qualified employees?” he asked. “With unemployment in Calistoga estimated at 1.6 percent, the joke is that if you have a pulse you can find a job here.” The problem, though, is that with two new resorts being built within three years, Calistoga will add 500 jobs.

A survey that asked Calistoga businesses where their employees live got 959 responses. Canning said 42 percent of them live in Calistoga, 23 percent live in the Napa Valley and 20 percent live in Santa Rosa.

The private bus shuttle is based on the Bridj model, which bills itself as the world’s first pop-up, smart mass transit system. It is in use in the greater Boston area and uses Smartphone technology and an app for consumers to get a ride to work.

Canning expects the comfortable, Wi-Fi-enabled buses to

begin service by picking up Calistoga workers at locations in Napa and Santa Rosa. The cost will range from \$10.57 to \$15.82 per employee per ride.

Canning said he will speak to Calistoga businesses in November to determine if and how much of the cost they will be willing to cover to get their employees to work.

Everyone knows it will cost something, he said.

He is expecting it will cost \$622 per employee per month and adds that he is expecting between 24 (worst case) and 84 (best case) employees to use the service, both in Napa and in Santa Rosa.

The private service is being used, he said, because “we need to move faster than government” transit services and because they will be faster than the VINE buses that make stops between Calistoga and Napa.

Canning spoke of the challenges of getting anyone to use a transit service rather than driving their own car: First, a person’s behavior needs to change, and second, a perceived loss of freedom needs to be overcome as does the stigma regarding public transportation.

During her speech, Handy listed new “mobility” options, which are alternatives to driving one’s car for commuting: micro-transit on demand, like Bridj, used mostly in urban areas; macro-transit, privately operated services such as the Google bus; ride sharing services like Uber and Lyft; driverless vehicles; and electric assisted bicycles, which vastly expand the use of a bike, especially in urban areas.

Napa County's David Morrison said the myth of the open road began with the Cumberland Gap and Oregon Trail and continued with Route 66. It's realized that the "open road is not an unlimited resource," especially as the United States grows from 300 million to 400 million people in coming years, he said.

With the expanding population and more projects being built, he said, there may not be a problem today in Napa County, but he added he sees one in five, 10 or 15 years.

"Since 1990, we've added 1,000 people a year, about 100 people a month and we're projected to do that for another 15 years. We can either wait until 2030 or we can start talking to find a solution," he said.

Part of the solution is getting project developers to pay into a fund to help pay for needed circulation improvements, he said.

Also speaking to the group were Supervisor Diane Dillon; John Dunbar, NCTPA board chairman; and Barbara Insel, president and CEO of Stonebridge Research, who reviewed a lot of data about traffic during one day and one week in October 2014. One finding was that the majority of traffic in Napa Valley is from commuters, not visitors, Insel said, although the data leave more questions than answers. After the presentations, the audience gathered in groups and each came up with their single recommendation for the next steps. They are:

- Encouraging businesses to create employee incentives to change commuting habits.

- Rallying large employers to provide shuttles to and from VINE bus stops.
- Implementing options for employees to work variable shift times or telecommute.
- Encouraging a countywide increase in traffic impact fees.
- Renewing outreach efforts to other rural or tourism-based communities that have had success and seek input to help Napa Valley model its approach.
- Bringing together representatives from the unincorporated county with those from the municipalities to tailor viable solutions for differing parts of the community that can address varying needs.
- Committing to reconvene in January to keep community leaders focused on executing ideas and implementing solutions to the issue of traffic and transportation.