

Fight for the Alum Rock BART plan

We hardly know what to make of the Valley Transportation Authority's blunder this fall on the long-planned Alum Rock BART station. The agency put out a report Oct. 6 that made no mention of the station and instead showed a stop at 23rd Street, with no parking, in the midst of single-family homes.

Either it was a clumsy attempt to dilute the value of an East San Jose stop so that it could be deleted from the next BART phase to reduce cost. Or, as VTA officials assert, nobody on staff remembered the decades-old plan for a station and parking garage near Five Wounds Church that has become a centerpiece of San Jose's planning for urban villages. It's hard to say which theory makes VTA look worse.

But we're sure of this: If you care whether BART serves East San Jose and the thousands of county residents to the south, attend one or all of three community meetings VTA has set up. The first is 6:30 p.m. Monday at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. Others will be Tuesday downtown and Dec. 9 in Santa Clara. Check www.vta.org/bart/upcomingmeetings for details.

After VTA produced the Oct. 6 document identifying 23rd Street as the East Side BART stop and making no mention of the longtime plan, activists for the Five Wounds urban villages and the nearby trail were irate. Their meeting with VTA director Nuria Fernandez soon after that was, let's just say, unsatisfying.

But before long, an apologetic letter from Fernandez and San Jose Councilman Ash Kalra, VTA board chairman, pledged renewed collaboration. The series of community meetings seems to be a pacific overture.

Planning the station at Five Wounds was far from arbitrary. Routing BART to serve the East Side was paramount in the thinking of then-San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales when he catapulted BART-to-downtown from dream to actual plan. The Five Wounds site presented opportunities for high-density growth around the station and, this is critical, for a parking garage right off Highway 101 for South County residents who expect access to the line.

VTA spent hours in community meetings discussing and changing plans for the Five Wounds area that could win over a reluctant neighborhood. It's a credit to that exercise that residents look forward to being a BART hub and plan accordingly.

There is a new challenge today. While local voter-approved taxes are paying the lion's share of BART line costs, federal funding is essential to complete the stretch downtown from Berryessa. And the world has changed since the project was planned. Money is scarce, funding formulas have changed and Republicans in Congress are not transit-friendly.

Santa Clara County can deal with this. But community leaders need to be engaged, from Mayor-elect Sam Liccardo to the grass-roots activists who flagged this near-disaster of VTA planning. So go to those meetings. And — not that there's any distrust or anything — take notes.