Response to VTA Board of Directors Workshop on *VTA's Future of Transportation*.

As a knowledgeable and committed transit professional, I was disappointed by Jerrett Walker's presentation during the VTA Board of Directors Workshop meeting on April 17, 2026. Early into *VTA's Future of Transportation*, consultant Walker dismissed Personal Rapid Transit (PRT, or podcars) and its potential. That bias led to several oversights in his **presentation slides**. The following helps fill in the holes.

2. Path to the Future Workshop Recap (slide 3)
LoopWorks agrees that "the agency must focus on three primary outcomes: Grow ridership; Increase productivity; Enhance the customer experience (CX)." It seems that VTA has already focused efforts in those areas without dramatic results. A podcar network serving 10 square-miles is expected to **grow ridership dramatically**, **increase productivity through automation**, and enhance the customer experience with **individual podcars** that go non-stop to desirable destinations.
"And achieve these outcomes in a financially sustainable way." While several PRT companies believe that providing podcar service can be profitable, the **Business Plan** of Intelligent Transportation Network System (ITNS) shares their numbers in the *Economics* section (starting on page 35). If their numbers are verified with an operating podcar network, then podcars could be the core of VTA's new business model.
"Investments in frequency will drive ridership and productivity improvements." While true, the cost of enough frequency is not clear. While Mr. Walker often cites 15-minute headways, research has shown that true ridership improvements occur when headways are 10 minutes or less. From the rider's perspective, 10-minute headways are frequent enough that bus service changes from a "scheduled" feel to a "frequent service" feel that encourages people to just show up without consulting a schedule. VTA's average bus and LRT headways exceed 20 minutes now. Is VTA able to double its rolling stock and driver count to achieve a 10-minute headway goal? While additional ridership and fare box recovery would likely reduce the extent of VTA's need for subsidies per rider, the fundamental mass transit model is unlikely to generate the profit needed to pay off the capital expenditure. Revenue from a possible regional sales tax would be inadequate to cover CapEx, as would other small-scale options/grants. Like the $12B BART Burrow, full funding for frequent service is elusive.

Why Fixed Transit? It's about Space (slide 12) - "Technology never changes geometry." LoopWorks agrees, but also asks why transit seems limited to 2 dimensions in a 3-dimensional world? In the 1-page article entitled **Points for transit planners to consider about PRT**, point #2 says "Use PRT in congested areas, and driverless vehicles (robo-taxis) elsewhere." Ground-level congestion is a real problem, and switching vehicles can make a big difference – thus the proliferation of bike lanes and e-bikes. PRT takes a different approach; build transit infrastructure above limited ground space.

It's also about labor. (slide 13) - "... the limits of urban space in dense places would still require big vehicles => fixed routes." Again, the consultant's long history of thinking in 2 dimensions obscures 1)

the possibilities of elevated transit, and 2) that congestion at ground level can be mitigated by removing just a portion of vehicles jockeying for space, even when latent demand is factored in. While big vehicles and fixed routes are useful, they are only part of our transportation picture. We want **synergy between the transportation options** that reduces single occupancy vehicle car trips (i.e. reduces congestion). A labor-light technology like PRT or robo-taxis can move people to/from transit hubs and BRT routes where labor-heavy options provide longer-range transit.

Why did it work? (slide 22) - "Not just a frequent network, but a frequent grid." While grids are good for serving an area rather than just a corridor, time-wasting transfers extend door-to-door travel times. As such, they are a serious disincentive when headway frequency is more than 10 minutes. Even then, each minute a rider waits for a bus to arrive feels like 3 minutes. A podcar network – whether laid out as a grid, hub-and-spoke, or other pattern – eliminates transfers within its service area. At originating podcar stops, podcars await riders, which shifts the service level feel beyond "frequent service" to "on-demand". Both on-demand service and no-transfer travel contribute to reducing door-to-door travel times – a critical factor in attracting riders.

4. Reimagine – Visionary Network Recap (slide 27)

More weekend service [PRT operates 24/7.]
More frequent service [PRT provides service appropriate to demand.]
Expanded hours [PRT operates 24/7.]
Service in new areas [PRT serves congested areas; robo-taxis serve elsewhere.]
New service models [PRT's potential to earn a profit is truly a new service model]
Builds on Next Network's successful network foundation [PRT's synergy with VTA's network could double or triple ridership.]

Mr. Walker has proposed a vision that includes more frequent service on fewer routes to reduce the average cost per rider. That seems like an extension of what VTA has already been doing. Does it qualify as a new business model as requested by Mayor Mahan, or one that would inspire voters to approve a regional tax measure? The vision does not incorporate smaller, demand-responsive technologies (PRT, robo-taxis, VTOL taxis) that could challenge mass transit's paradigm of big vehicles on fixed routes. Since roughly 80% of trips already occur in small vehicles (cars), such an omission seems deliberate. Another omission is the heavy financial burden the BART Burrow places on VTA finances ($1M/day), and how little impact that 1960's technology will have on VTA's ridership after opening ten years in the future.

After decades of watching government agencies work with consultants, I've concluded that consultants try their best to say what the agency wants to hear. So, I ask, was it VTA staff or the VTA Board that encouraged Mr. Walker's conservative approach to envisioning *VTA's Future of Transportation?*