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Major mistake may delay train

BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT
Daily Post Staff Writer

An international contractor that is getting paid nearly \$1 billion to electrify Caltrain is having serious issues with construction and made "a rookie mistake" that threatens the project's timeline, Caltrain officials said.

The contractor, Balfour Beatty, has been ordered to stop all tests and won't get paid until there's a plan for correcting its issues and a third-party auditor is brought in, said Pranaya Shrestha, the chief officer of Caltrain's modernization program.

A substation in San Jose was incorrectly wired, causing a short circuit during testing, Shrestha said.

Workers were following old drawings for the wiring, and Balfour Beatty's internal controls are to blame, Shrestha told the Caltrain board on Thursday.

"That's a rookie mistake. In my 30-
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CALTRAIN OFFICIALS are worried issues with its contractor will further delay its new electric trains, such as the one shown here, from rolling down the track next year. Caltrain photo.

TRAIN

year career, I've never seen that," he said. "This is Construction 101."

If Balfour Beatty doesn't turn it around within the next month, then the project's budget and scheduled completion in September 2024 are at risk, Shrestha said.

Caltrain will take steps to "protect its financial interests" while also trying to get better results from Balfour Beatty, he said.

That includes sending workers to Balfour Beatty's warehouses to ensure every nut, bolt and wire is there, Shrestha said.

"We are doing things we normally wouldn't, but just have to," Shrestha said.

Balfour Beatty has a history of cost overruns and schedule delays. The project was delayed in 2021 for two years because of unforeseen underground conditions, and Caltrain reached a settlement with the company over additional costs.

Besides the wiring failure, the company also hasn't brought in the needed labor, parts and equipment to complete the project, Shrestha said.

Workers put up 14,105 linear miles of wires that will connect with the train since Feb. 6, but they have another 262,695 miles to go, Shrestha said.

Stretches of Caltrain tracks will be closed for 10 of the next 11 weekends to continue the wiring work. Caltrain is encouraging people to take the bus in those areas instead.

"We're inconveniencing our customers to give (Balfour Beatty) more time to get work done, and so far they're not taking advantage of it. And that's just unacceptable to me" Caltrain board member Steve Heminger of San Francisco said at the meeting.

\$2.5 billion project

Altogether, the project is expected to cost \$2.5 billion. Shrestha said Caltrain won't have to pay to fix Balfour Beatty's mistakes, but Caltrain employees are spending time keeping an eye on the project.

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San Francisco Supervisor Shamann Walton, who represents San Francisco on Caltrain's board, called Balfour Beatty incompetent and asked lawyers to look into passing a resolution saying that Caltrain won't work with Balfour Beatty ever again.

Executive Director Michelle Bouchard assured the board that the project will be finished on time and on budget, and Balfour Beatty executives seem like they are taking the issues seriously.

"This is somewhat of a disappointing start for what we had hoped to be an aggressive, confidence-building few weekends," she said.

Balfour Beatty's head of rail in the United Kingdom and the company's global CEO are coming out to Caltrain next week, and Bouchard is planning a trip to their offices in Washington, D.C., she said.

San Mateo County Supervisor Ray Mueller asked if there was any possibility of divorcing Balfour Beatty, and Bouchard said that it was too late.

Only a few companies can electrify trains, and Balfour Beatty has had its shovels in the ground since 2017, she said.

Balfour Beatty's CEO will meet with the board in early June.

"Hopefully we won't have too tough of a meeting," Bouchard said.

Palo Alto Councilman Pat Burt, representing the cities of Santa Clara County on the Caltrain board, said that he doesn't want Caltrain to over-rely on contractors without holding their feet the fire.

"These are really serious breakdowns," he said.

He reported to Palo Alto City Council on Monday that Caltrain leaders may be overly optimistic about the completion date, which is partially beyond their control.

Company fined over crash

Balfour Beatty was fined \$25,000 by Cal/OSHA in January after a Caltrain with 75 passengers crashed into three trucks at 63 miles per hour in San Bruno on March 10 last year.

There was a miscommunication between dispatchers and on-site crews, who were working on electrification, according to the citation. Fourteen people were injured.

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