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BART to step up anti-PCB effort

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By Dick Rogers
Staff writer

OAKLAND — The Bay Area Rapid Transit District says it will spend as much as $137,000 through June in a hurry-up effort to rid itself of PCB, a hazardous substance linked to cancer.

The expenditure, approved Thursday by the district's board of directors, is part of a $479,000 program to decontaminate most PCB-laden electrical parts and install safer replacements.

PCB — polychlorinated biphenyls — is banned by the federal Environmental Protection Agency as a safety hazard. It is suspected of causing cancer and has been connected to a host of other ailments.

Although EPA rules would allow the transit district to replace contaminated parts as they fail, BART decided several years ago to accelerate the program, completing replacements in two to three years.

Under the contract approved Thursday, Holly Electric Corp. of Jacksonville, Fla., will remove and cleanse hundreds of capacitors and other electrical equipment in the next nine months.

About 2,200 capacitors — each containing roughly two liters of PCB-laced oil for insulation and cooling — are installed in propulsion circuits on BART's 431-car fleet.

Because high voltages and heavy currents are applied to the parts, failures produce heat and sometimes rupture the protective casings around the capacitors.

Oil from leaking capacitors remains in an equipment box surrounding the parts. The box must be dismantled and cleaned before new parts can be connected.

For the last 1½ years, BART has replaced the parts as they fail, roughly at the rate of six to 10 per year. But at that pace, it would take centuries before the cars would be freed of contaminants.

Instead, BART elected to undertake a more ambitious program, slightly redesigning propulsion circuits and finding new, acceptable capacitors.

BART spokesman Mike Healy said the transit district simply decided to dispose of the problem, as well as the material.

"The primary reason is that we no longer wanted to be concerned about the hazardous wastes," he said. "We wanted to get rid of them once and for all."

Not all equipment will be replaced, however. About 10,000 capacitors — considered too small to pose a hazard, according to BART Safety Director Ralph Weule — will remain in service.

A power transformer in the transbay tube likewise won't be changed. The transformer, which contains 2,700 gallons of PCB-contaminated oil, works properly and is inspected regularly for leaks, according to Weule.

While cleanup of defective capacitors proceeds, BART is seeking bids on substitute parts, which will contain a form of mineral oil containing non-toxic chemicals, Healy said.

Despite their advantage, the new capacitors are considered more flammable, complicating the replacement program.

To minimize the likelihood of fire from overheated parts, BART will install switches to cut off power when pressures inside the capacitors climb.

Once circuit modifications are in place and new capacitors arrive — probably about next April — full-scale replacement efforts will begin, according to Healy.

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