



AUTHORITY AGENDA ITEM 4a - PUBLIC COMMENT

May 15, 2024

Chair Pedroza and Commissioners
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

Dear Chair Pedroza and Commissioners:

On behalf of residents of Richmond, and other East Bay commuters who are nurses, teachers, carpenters, housekeepers, janitors and other blue-collar workers commuting to jobs at Bay Area Council member companies, or other employers, we write to request that the Bay Area Toll Authority and MTC request that the Bay Conservation and Development Commission revise its permits for the Richmond San Rafael Bridge to restore the historic third lane on the upper deck and dedicate it during commute hours to carpools and transit (and, if needed beyond transit options, additional bike shuttles).

The pandemic and the rise of remote work laid bare and exacerbated sometimes conflicting public policy goals in the Bay Area. Policymakers must balance a desire to promote active transportation, such as walking and biking, while also working hard on social equity goals making life and economic opportunity easier for historically disadvantaged places and people.

Perhaps nowhere in the Bay Area is that conflict more obvious or more raw than on the Richmond San Rafael Bridge.

In 2016, you authorized a pilot project to take what had been both a third traffic lane or a breakdown lane and turn it into a separated and protected bike lane. Despite many millions of dollars spent improving bike lane connections to the bridge on both the Marin and Contra Costa sides, and years spent vigorously campaigning for and incentivizing biking on the bridge (including rebates and incentives for e-bikes, an e-bike share program, a Miles app with rewards for people that take "Green Trips", etc.), to most objective observers, the pilot has failed. According to daily bike counts, on good weather days, only 21 bikers cross the bridge during the morning commute. On bad weather days, it can be as few as 8 or even 2 riders. There are exceptionally few pedestrians. On the weekends, bike ridership does spike up to an average of 146 bikers riding back and forth over the whole day. (For comparison, the Golden Gate Bridge has about 6,000 bikers a day).

Biking is good, and recreation is good. But it must be balanced with the cost, and we must decide where is the highest best use of resources and locations for active transportation. Some bike trails in Marin and Contra Costa, such as the Mill Valley/Sausalito Pathway and the Iron Horse Trail, have thousands of riders a day, and are an excellent use of public funds and public right of way. The Richmond Bridge is not, especially during the morning commute.

Rain or shine, each workday, 80,000 drivers cross the Richmond San Rafael Bridge, and during the morning commute, approximately 18,000 Bay Area residents try to cross the Richmond San Rafael Bridge in their car or pick-up truck going to work in Marin and Sonoma. The vast majority of them (63%) are people of color. Sixty-nine percent of them do not have a college degree, and the majority of them (60%) make less than Bay Area's median income. (For comparison, according to the US Census Bureau, in the Bay Area, white riders represent 61% of the bike commuters, followed by Hispanics at 17%, Asians at 15% and African Americans at 2.4%. And bike riders are well off, with 1 in 4 making \$250,000 or more a year.)



Virtually all these drivers have no other practical means to get to work, including remote work. Since they often come from very long distances and from all over the East Bay, biking, walking and public transit are not practical commute options.

As these 18,000 drivers approach the Richmond San Rafael Bridge, they hit a very significant and growing traffic jam. During the peak hour, on average, they face 16 minutes of gridlocked, stop-and-go traffic. What the term “average” misses is that often and unpredictably, the backup is far worse, as without a third lane or pullover lane it is exceptionally hard to clear accidents, and therefore these teachers and nurses tell us, and tell their employers, and tell surveyors that they must leave much earlier than normal, just in case there is a huge back up, so they aren’t chronically late to work and lose their job. That’s time taken away from getting sleep or spending time with their families. This traffic jam on the freeway also backs up local streets and roads in the City of Richmond, impacting many local families who aren’t even trying to get on the Richmond Bridge.

The congestion from the backup are predicted to significantly worsen in the next two years, with a peak hour 15-minute delay-per-person-per-day growing to 24 minutes, meaning that unless something is done, in three years these drivers will spend 2 hours, per week, sitting in gridlock waiting to cross the Richmond San Rafael Bridge in the morning! This will also further impact local streets and roads in Richmond.

In 2016, while you authorized a bike lane that impacted the Richmond side of the Bridge, you also authorized the opening of a third lane to help the Marin side. Many Richmond residents and leaders have declared this patently unfair, and offensively flies in the face of social equity goals.

Richmond and Contra Costa residents deserve the same relief that the Marin side was granted a few years ago. In 2016, the Bay Area Toll Authority and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission declared that the Marin side of the bridge (not the Richmond side), had “unacceptable levels of service,” not only on the freeway, but the local Marin streets in Larkspur and San Rafael. Agencies authorized a \$74 million project to re-open the third lane of the lower deck and make related improvements to the freeway. Completed two years later, Caltrans and MTC proudly reported that the new lane “has eliminated afternoon congestion on eastbound I- 580 onto the bridge saving drivers approximately 15 minutes daily on their seven-mile trip from Marin to Contra Costa County. This equates to annual savings of 700,000 vehicle-hours of delay on weekdays and another 91,000 vehicle hours on weekends.” The project was put up for awards and won “Project of the Year” in California.

It is good to experiment and do pilots, but that comes with the responsibility to be clear eyed about the results. The pilot has failed to fill with bikers and lots of real people are suffering as a result. This project is important to the region. It has been supported by many editorials, columns and news stories. Richmond residents and bridge commuters have written 21,259 letters to you and our elected officials, which is astounding. We believe these East Bay commuters and residents matter. Please sponsor this permit change so that you can show them that you think they matter too.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jim Wunderman'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Jim' being particularly prominent.

Jim Wunderman
President and CEO