

Increasing bridge tolls won't reduce Bay Area traffic

By David Schonbrunn

This is the year for transportation funding. Voters will be asked in June to approve increased bridge tolls and in November to extend the Marin transportation sales tax. These measures are supposed to reduce traffic. To help you evaluate how likely that reduction in traffic is, we offer our explanation of the root cause of traffic congestion.

Marin's towns grew up around railroad stations. Motorcars didn't exist back then. Whether it was commuting to San Francisco or sending milk to market, travel was by train or horse. The widespread adoption of the car enabled suburban homes to be built far away from train stations, inhibiting walking there. Most often, there are no convenient alternatives to driving alone.

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65 percent of commuters driving alone, the roadways physically can't fit all their vehicles. (In a second, entirely independent crisis, motor vehicles are the largest source of greenhouse gases in the county.) With 2 million more Bay Area residents expected in the coming decades, congestion and greenhouse gas emissions will only get worse.

Congestion is a result of the affordability of cars mixed with widespread suburbanization. Avoiding gridlock will take a shift from driving alone to shared travel, calling for learning new travel habits. The place to start is making carpool lanes flow freely during congested periods. The resulting significantly faster travel time will provide enough incentive for some drivers to carpool. New smartphone ridesharing apps similar to Uber make it convenient to pick up a passenger living nearby, going to a similar destination.

Heavy promotion of ridesharing would create a large pool of potential passengers, increasing

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Improving mobility will require a new set of regional priorities favoring carpooling and transit over solo driving. To round off the package, a network of convenient bus lines, cost-effective rail lines and protected bike lanes will provide alternatives to driving.

In other parts of the country, like Portland, one can easily get around without a car. The OccupyMTC.org website shows how Seattle's voters approved a comprehensive bus network and achieved a major shift away from solo driving. Bay Area residents might want to make a

similar choice to have a brighter future. Unfortunately, such an option is not on the ballot.

The sponsors of Regional Measure 3, the proposed \$3 bridge toll increase on the June ballot, admit that traffic is heading towards gridlock: "This is our chance to reduce traffic BEFORE it brings Marin County to a standstill." What they don't have is a plan to address the fundamental problem: excessive solo driving.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission has set the Bay Area's transportation priorities for decades. Traffic conditions in the region have steadily worsened over that time, prob-

ably because MTC's ongoing financial support for solo driving has starved the development of alternatives to driving alone.

MTC's own projections for 2040 show a million more cars, with total driving increasing by 21 percent and congestion delays increasing by 44 percent. With 2.5 million more daily solo driving trips than now, it's clear the projects in the measure aren't going to "reduce traffic." If approved, it will lock the region into a downward spiral of congestion.

TRANSDEF.org suggests voters reject Regional Measure 3, and demand instead a better plan — one that enables large numbers of commuters to conveniently travel by shared rides, bikes and transit. A ridesharing system would do far more for long-term mobility than the projects promised in the measure — without any construction costs.

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