

# The case against Contra Costa County's Measure J: wrong path to traffic relief

By David Schonbrunn

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A new diesel-powered train runs on the track during a test run of a new BART extension that runs from the Pittsburg-Bay Point station to Hillcrest Avenue in Antioch, Calif., on Wednesday, May 23, 2018. The new people moving line runs down the middle of Highway 4 for that length

Why is it that governments keep asking us to approve more taxes to “fix congestion” yet congestion keeps getting worse? By hiding in plain sight, the answer is kept invisible: suburban development.

Suburban development is strongly tied to congestion by the fact that suburban residents, for the most part, are dependent on their automobiles for mobility. While that's not true of San Francisco or Manhattan, it is typically difficult to walk, bike or use transit to get to suburban destinations. We define suburban development as that which is conveniently accessible only by private

approximately as much as current residents (most of the Bay Area is similar). Jamming the cars of 300,000 new residents onto already crowded highways is a formula for gridlock.

The local Transportation Authority predicts that congestion will increase by 166% over that period. And yet it is asking the voters to approve Measure J next month, a doubling of the transportation sales tax, for the purpose of “reducing congestion.” When pressed, the authority admits that its tax would reduce congestion *only as compared to doing nothing*.

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If that's the best Measure J can do, what would be better? The only way to avoid all those added cars is to avoid building suburban developments to house the new residents. If the new residents live in townhouses, condos and apartments within walking distance of frequent transit, many of them will use transit rather than drive. They will find that transit is more pleasant than driving in heavy traffic.

Our group is opposing Measure J because we want to call attention to how Contra Costa's quality of life will continue to deteriorate if future development patterns aren't changed. Funding a convenient transit network would be far more beneficial long-term than Measure J's effort to put off the inevitable day of reckoning a while longer by wringing every last bit of capacity out of the road network.

The good news is that the housing preferences of Millennials have swung away from suburbs toward a more urbanized lifestyle accompanied by good transit. While this raises plenty of issues (including stratospheric rents, gentrification and displacement), highway congestion is not among them.

The legislative fight over SB50, Sen. Scott Wiener’s response to the housing crisis, had it exactly backward: rather than mandating higher densities near transit, what is really needed is a requirement that all new development have frequent transit within a convenient walking distance.

This is how development was done a century ago: Developers built streetcar lines to serve the homes they built in what are now called “streetcar suburbs.”

Every Bay Area resident knows — either consciously or unconsciously — that the status quo cannot continue indefinitely. Despite decades of tax measures that claim they will “relieve congestion,” traffic keeps getting worse. It’s time for the Bay Area to put an end to suburban development.

That way of life simply throws off too much auto traffic. The region needs to build around frequent transit.

*David Schonbrunn is a transit advocate and president of transdef.org.*

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