

Poll: Voters support \$3 bridge toll hike to ease traffic gridlock



Traffic moves slowly along Southbound Highway 101 at the Marinwood exit during the morning commute in San Rafael, Calif. (IJ archive photo/Alan Dep)

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With constant gridlock turning freeways into parking lots, BART trains packed to the gills and mounting concerns about how to accommodate continued growth in the region, more than half of prospective voters said they'd be willing to pay up to \$3 more in bridge tolls to ease congestion, according to a [new poll](#).

Commissioned by the region's two largest business boosters, the Bay Area Council and Silicon Valley Leadership Group, along with the transportation policy think-tank, SPUR, the poll surveyed more than 9,000 residents, 85 percent of whom said they felt traffic is worse this year than it was last year. Roughly three quarters, or 74 percent, said they'd be willing to pay more to cross the Bay Area's [seven state-owned bridges](#) if that money is invested in "big regional projects" that ease traffic and improve mass transit.

But it's unclear just how much people would actually be willing to pay.

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More than half of the poll's respondents, or 56 percent, said they would "probably" or "definitely" be willing to pay for gradually increasing tolls that rise to \$3 in 2022. That would raise about \$5 billion over 25 years, if the first hike went into effect on July 1 next year. Just three percent more people, or 59 percent total, said they'd support a smaller toll hike of \$2, according to the poll results.

It costs \$5 to cross every bridge in the Bay Area, except the Golden Gate Bridge, which is not part of this proposal, and the Bay Bridge, which costs between \$4-\$6 depending on the time and day.

Money from the increased tolls could be used on a wide range of projects, such as expanded ferry service, buying 300 more BART cars to allow the agency to run longer trains, increasing the number of freeway carpool and express lanes, beefing up express bus services, extending BART to San Jose and other improvements. Lawmakers are expected to draft a list of proposed projects before the measure goes out to voters.

The proposed funding would be in addition to [several taxes voters approved](#) last November, including BART's \$3.5 billion bond measure, the AC Transit parcel tax and Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's transportation sales tax. It also comes on the heels of the recently-passed SB1, a [gas tax and transportation funding](#) bill lawmakers approved earlier this year.

Those measures, with the exception of the Santa Clara sales tax, were focused on repairing and maintaining an aging system, said Randy Rentschler, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which oversees the distribution of bridge toll monies. Money from the proposed toll increase would primarily be focused on new construction or projects to increase capacity along bridge corridors.

He likened the difference to “aging pains” and “growing pains.”

“A lot of people are deeply, deeply frustrated by having to be in traffic all the time,” Rentschler said. “The focus here is on congestion relief along the bridge corridors. It's not trying to rehab every local street.”

And big transportation projects are expensive, often requiring multiple funding sources, said Carl Guardino, president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. It doesn't help that for the past four decades, the federal and state governments have not adequately funded transportation improvements, he said.

“When you starve something for decades, it takes more than one meal or more than one bite to make it healthy again,” Guardino said. “It's the same with people, and it's the same with transportation infrastructure.”

In the past, bridge toll funds have gone to support myriad projects. Regional Measure 2, which voters approved in 2004, helped fund the fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel; BART's extension to Warm Springs, Antioch and the Oakland airport connector; light rail in San Francisco; high-occupancy vehicle lanes on Interstate 580 and Interstate 80; improvements to Clipper cards and much more. That was the first time tolls had been raised since 1988, when voters approved Regional Measure 1.

“It seems like every 12 to 14 years, we take a crack at this,” Rentschler said. “It's not an everyday thing.”

The proposed measure is slated to go before voters in June or November next year. It needs a simple majority across the nine-county Bay Area to be approved.

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Erin Baldassari, reporter for the Bay Area News Group, is photographed for a Wordpress profile in Oakland, Calif., on Wednesday, July 27, 2016. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News

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