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It's back: Bay Area traffic rebounding as coronavirus lockdown eases

Congestion, metering lights and express lane tolls make a comeback



SAN FRANCISCO, CA – MAY 27: Traffic moves west bound along the the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge on Wednesday, May 27, 2020, in San Francisco, Calif. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

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For weeks, it was one of the most enjoyable and unnerving signs of the Bay Area's coronavirus lockdown: Freeways so deserted you could glide through San Francisco and across the Bay Bridge at the height of rush hour with barely a tap of your brakes.

But the silver lining of a traffic-free Bay Area is vanishing as shelter in place orders are revised, allowing more businesses to reopen and people start traveling around the region — kick-starting a return of congestion and an end to wide open roads.

"It was a walk in the park," said Ed Bergman, who crossed the bridge several times during the shelter order while driving for Lyft. "Just get on the road and go."

Cars are once again creeping along the San Francisco approach to the Bay Bridge during the evening commute, which in the pre-pandemic era was consistently ranked the [most traffic-choked corridor](#) in the region. A sea of brake lights has also returned to the Eastshore Freeway in Emeryville and Berkeley, another notorious stretch.

The metering lights have been switched back on at the Bay Bridge toll plaza. And starting this week, the region's freeway express lanes [will resume charging tolls](#), after collection was suspended more than two months ago because highways were traffic-free.

"We sort of bottomed out in early April and have slowly but steadily been climbing," said John Goodwin, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which operates the toll lanes.

The number of cars crossing the Bay Area's state-owned bridges was down by more than half at its lowest point in April, according to the commission's data.

By last week, though, crossings had rebounded to about two-thirds of pre-coronavirus levels across the spans. The Bay Bridge is back to three-quarters of normal volume, topping 100,000 cars last Tuesday and Wednesday for the first time since shelter in place orders went into effect in March.

Today's traffic jams are still a far cry from the misery that defined life before the pandemic, when rush hour tied up just about every major corridor and in some particularly congested spots seemed to be a fact of life [no matter the time or day](#).

Goodwin said congestion so far isn't lasting as long as it once did, and afflicts a smaller number of busy stretches, "But it's there."

And there are worrying signs that traffic will only get worse as the coronavirus recovery continues and more people return to work.

That's because transportation experts and public transit agencies expect many people will be [more inclined to drive than take public transportation](#), figuring their private car is a safer bet for avoiding coronavirus than sharing a train or bus with other passengers.

And they aren't the only ones. Last week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [released a set of guidelines](#) for office buildings recommending employers provide incentives such as free parking that encourage people to drive alone to work rather than take public transportation.

A car-centric recovery appears to be at hand in data from the Bay Area — while bridge traffic is rebounding quickly, BART ridership fell more steeply and is recovering at a much slower pace.

The transit system is now carrying more than 30,000 passengers each workday, with just over 33,000 riding on Wednesday. That's an increase compared to mid-April, when BART was carrying fewer than 25,000 passengers on weekdays, but ridership remains less than 10 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

The return of traffic — not to mention deteriorating air quality and rising greenhouse gas emissions — will be the consequence if that trend continues.

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