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Borenstein: 27 Bay Area transit agencies! No wonder travel is so hard

Here's a plan to make buses and trains easy to ride and save the region from costly, inequitable autos and freeways





The Bay Area's 27 transit agencies. (Courtesy of Seamless Bay Area)

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The Bay Area is served by [27 transit agencies](#). Twenty-seven.

From bigger ones such as VTA, BART, AC Transit, Capitol Corridor, SFMTA and Caltrain to more-local systems such as LAVTA, WestCAT, County Connection and Tri-Delta Transit, getting around on buses, trains and ferries requires struggling with a confusing maze of agencies, schedules, uncoordinated connections and differing fare structures.

Little wonder transit was used for only 12% of all commute trips in 2018 while 75% used cars. And then the pandemic struck — and transit patronage plummeted.



Meanwhile, Bay Area residents pay dearly through taxes, tolls and fares for transit agencies that have some of the proportionately highest [administrative expenses](#) in the country and [costliest and slowest](#) capital projects.

Without a complete revamping of Bay Area transit, the region will remain dependent on polluting autos and costly freeway construction — perpetuating an inequity in which those who can afford it drive in the comfort of their cars while those of lesser means must limp along on marginal public transit.

So what do we do?

In a thoughtful [analysis](#) released this month, the transit rider-driven group Seamless Bay Area provides a vision for integration and unified management of the region's transportation systems. It should serve as the starting point for serious discussion by local, regional and state officials about how to revamp our failing public transit.

After examining governing structures around the nation and the world, Seamless calls for creation of a Bay Area regional agency run by a 15-member, appointed board of transit experts with a mandate and resources to coordinate the systems into a cohesive, easy-to-use network.

On one hand, it might be political fantasy to think powerful transportation officials would cede power for the greater good of the region. On the other hand, it's the only meaningful option we have.

The Seamless analysis fills a void left by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which has failed to fulfill [its mandate](#) to coordinate Bay Area transit. The agency's prior executive director, [Steve Heminger](#), focused his 18-year reign on bridges, highways and building a personal empire rather than transit reform. And Therese McMillan, who replaced Heminger two years ago, has yet to put forth a plan.

Ultimately, however, the blame lies with the 21 MTC commissioners, mostly local elected officials more concerned with raising taxes and getting their cut of the revenue pie than changing the ineffectual transit status quo.

While MTC fiddles, BART is rushing to fill the void. That should alarm anyone who cares about public transit. BART has [one of only four](#) directly elected transit boards in the nation. Most of the directors focus on pleasing the labor unions that helped elect them rather than meaningful change.

As demonstrated by its [passenger satisfaction surveys](#), pre-pandemic [declining ridership](#), [excessive labor contracts](#), [deceit of the voters](#) who approved their tax increases and attempts to [block a voter-mandated independent auditor](#), BART can't manage its own house, let alone the region's.



Yet, using expected funds from bridge toll increases Bay Area voters approved in 2018 and money from property tax increases BART convinced its voters to approve in 2016, the rail system is plowing ahead with what it calls [Link21](#).

Ostensibly to plan a second transbay passenger rail tunnel, the justification for questionable use of restricted toll and tax money, Link21 is actually a 21-county rail coordination project, with BART and Capitol Corridor at the helm, driving their self-interested trains. That's not the objective, passenger-oriented policy planning the region needs.

Which is why Seamless Bay Area's efforts are so critical. A non-profit funded by grants and contributions from groups such as Silicon Valley Community Foundation and American Public Transportation Association, Seamless analyzed options for governing a regional transit network.

The goal is "a seamless rider-first transit system" with, for example, common fare structures and integrated route planning. The group recommends a merger of BART, Caltrain, Golden Gate Transit, the Water Emergency Transportation Authority ferry system and Sonoma-Marin Area Rapid Transit.

That combined agency would be run by the appointed 15-member board of transit experts. It resembles what's been done in Seattle, Toronto and Manchester, England.

The first step in the Seamless plan would be [merger of BART and Caltrain](#) to provide a rail network that circles the bay south of the Golden Gate. The group emphasizes that BART should not run an agency that comes out of that merger.

There's a lot to chew on here. The big question is whether we want to be a victim of our regional history that produced 27 transit agencies. Or do we want to create a coordinated system that serves passengers' interests?

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