

Commissioner Workshop on Proposed Modifications to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge Public Pathway Project

Discussion Summary | January 16, 2025

On January 16, 2025, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission held a Commissioner workshop on an amendment request from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to modify the multi-use path and peak hour travel lane currently being piloted on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. As part of the workshop, the 15 participating Commissioners broke into small groups to discuss public access benefits and feasibility along the bridge corridor. This summary provides key points that arose during the small group discussions.

A. Benefits of Public Access on the Bridge

Groups were given the opportunity to discuss the benefits of providing public access along the bridge corridor, but only one group had a discussion that focused on this topic. Potential benefits identified include:

- Increasing public access, including providing recreational opportunities, Bay Trail connectivity, vistas, and enjoyment of the Bay
- Alternative modes of transportation for commuting
- Health benefits for the individual and the community
- Decreased GHG emissions
- Fishing opportunities

There was some confusion among Commissioners as to whether transportation across the bridge is considered a form of public access, as some Commissioners were thinking of car commuting as public access. As a matter of interpretation and application of BCDC's public access policies, staff does not believe it appropriate to consider vehicle mobility as a question of public access.

B. Public Access Feasibility & Consistency

Commissioners were asked to consider what information might lead them to conclude that a given public access improvement on the bridge is not feasible, and what factors they believe are relevant to the discussion of whether or not public access is feasible or suitable for the site.

- Some Commissioners believed that the pilot has already demonstrated that the current multi-use path, available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, is feasible, and that the question of whether the availability should be reduced should really focus on whether it presents significant use conflicts. This came up in at least two discussions.

- Commissioners listed issue areas they believed were relevant to considering whether providing the path on the bridge posed potential use conflicts, including the following: environmental impacts, equity, economic impacts, and safety. In general, potential impacts were discussed as impacts resulting from congestion and queuing, and whether that effect, if attributed to the path, was contributing to increased emissions, decreased regional economic health, and decreased quality of life. A group also raised the question of whether the cost of implementing and maintaining the path was commensurate with the benefit it is providing.
- **Equity.** All groups identified equity as an important factor, with some Commissioners ranking it highest among their concerns. Commissioners felt that an equity analysis is important, and at least one group raised that an equity analysis should have been done before the modification proposal was made.
 - Equity concerns included the location of congestion near communities of color potentially impacting air quality, whether users of the path were representative of local demographics, the distribution of funding resources for access improvements between the different sides of the bridge, and whether the path provides equitable access for all users.
 - On the location of congestion, one group of Commissioners noted that the communities in Richmond closest to the bridge were more likely to be communities of color and/or bearing environmental justice burdens and questioned whether traffic could be moved away from neighborhoods to another location where fewer people live. Another group noted that changing the queuing location to a place like the bridge could negatively impact access for emergency responders.
 - Commissioners felt it was important to have more data about the demographics of the people using the bridge and where they are traveling to and from, including more information about who is biking on the bridge.
 - Commissioners also discussed the accessibility of cycling as an activity, noting that it can be both expensive while also being more affordable than owning a car. It was raised that there are programs in Richmond to help offset costs and increase access to e-bikes.
- **Incidents.** Commissioners generally felt that safety and incidents were important factors to consider. Most of the discussion about incidents was in terms of the potential for incidents to result in additional congestion and delays, whether the path affects incident response, and the subsequent impacts of

delays on peak hour commuters. Commissioners questioned whether the low rate of incidents warranted changing the availability of public access. Some noted that the reported number of incidents on the bridge was much lower than expected, which led them to wonder whether there was another more impactful source of congestion, such as the tolling operation.

- **Emissions.** All of the groups discussed concerns about the potential impact of the path on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as they wondered whether increased emissions would be considered an adverse impact on natural resources that might constitute a significant use conflict. Commissioners were curious whether the path reduced emissions and whether any congestion that might result from the path had any effect on emissions. They wondered how factors such as vehicle speeds, vehicle miles traveled, traffic volumes, and vehicle types impact GHG emissions. Commissioners also debated whether GHG emissions were under BCDC's authority to regulate.
- **Congestion.** Commissioners acknowledged that commute times are not under BCDC's authority, but many noted that severe congestion may affect whether the proposed public access is consistent with the project. Discussions around congestion centered around the following points:
 - Commissioners were unclear whether the path has had a more significant effect on traffic than other aspects of the corridor that could be improved instead. All groups discussed the impacts of the toll plaza and current lane configurations on congestion, and some raised the concern that they might approve the reduction of public access only to discover that the main sources of congestion were actually unrelated to the path and could have been addressed differently.
 - They wanted to understand the effect that alternative solutions (restriping, directing merges, improving the bridge approach to reduce incident rates, managing time of travel) could have on congestion, and saw the planned improvements at the toll plaza as an opportunity to see if some congestion concerns could be alleviated without affecting the path.
 - Commissioners also wanted to better understand the impact of congestion on people. They were curious what the actual increases in commute times have been and by how much, whether there has been an increase in how often incidents increase commute times beyond what people can routinely plan for, how many people are affected, and the economic impact of the additional time spent as a result of the path.

- Commissioners wanted to understand operations downstream (west) of the bridge, and how they affect or are affected by the path.

C. Pilot Modifications

All of the groups spent some time discussing the permittee's proposal to modify the pilot, including its potential impacts, design, and possible alternatives.

- Commissioners understood the proposed modifications to be a reduction of public access, but not a complete removal of public access. Some Commissioners pointed out that even though the proposed shuttle would help transport cyclists across the bridge, the modifications would result in a total loss of pedestrian access to the bridge when the path is closed. Commissioners felt it was important to consider all of the public access uses that would be affected by the modification, including walking, cycling, and fishing.
- Commissioners asked whether there should be mitigation for the reduction of public access, whether off-site public access could be provided in lieu, such as improving connections and closing gaps in the trail system leading to the bridge or creating viewing platforms or birdwatching areas, and whether there would or could be programming to teach interested cyclists how to bike the bridge.
- Commissioners expressed concern about the usability of the proposed shuttle and wondered about what the actual impact of the modifications on cycling would be.
- There were some concerns about the proposed methodology for the pilot and modifications, including the effect of changing variables before the Commission has all the information they need about the current pilot, lack of clarity for how findings of the study have resulted in the proposed modifications, lack of analysis of alternative approaches, and lack of relevant analyses that could more clearly define the issues (such as modeling and equity analysis).
- Commissioners wondered if it would be possible to delay any modifications until after other improvements are in place to see their effects.
- Commissioners wondered whether closing gaps in the trail system could increase usership of the bridge path.
- Commissioners also shared some other ideas for addressing congestion on the bridge, including using the third lane as an HOV lane, making one level of the bridge a vehicle deck and the other a transit and public access deck, and building emergency vehicle turnouts with bike/ped overpasses.

- Commissioners acknowledged that there is still a lot they don't know about the effect of the path and other variables, and that the data may always be incomplete.

D. Other Information Desired

During their discussions, Commissioners stated interest in the following information they felt was relevant to this topic. These include:

- Impacts of the Path
 - o An understanding of whether the path is directly or indirectly causing an increase in environmental damage beyond what would have occurred without it
 - o An equity analysis involving a panel of experts and talking to communities about how they see the path
 - o Understanding how the path affects GHG emissions and, more generally, how factors such as vehicle speeds, vehicle miles traveled, traffic volumes, and vehicle types affect emissions, and whether reduced congestion would lead to higher traffic volumes and higher emissions
 - o Minutes delayed from regular commute
 - o Assessment of variability
 - o An economic model assessing the cost of congestion
 - o Understanding of the Caltrans policy driving the modification proposal
 - o Assessment of alternative solutions
 - o Data about how “downstream” operations affect traffic on the bridge, and vice versa
 - o Additional study of existing configuration
- Traffic Patterns
 - o Traffic modeling
 - o The impact of “return to office” on traffic patterns
 - o Understanding of how the bridge and SR-37 function as part of a network, how they affect each other, whether they provide alternatives to one another
- Incidents
 - o Incident simulations
 - o Other sources of incident data
 - o Reporting of incidents between cars and pedestrians, including incidents related to debris from cars

- Usage
 - More details about the usage of other Bay Trail segments
 - More detailed demographics of cyclists, percentage of recreational vs commute cyclists
 - Origin/destination information for both vehicles and cyclists
 - Examples of other shared use rights-of-way that are not all 24/7