

The Mercury News

Walking and using transit is good for both personal and community health. Let's actually encourage it.

To cover free ridership and costs, each person in the three BART counties would pay about \$3.23 a week, less than your Monday latte.

By [MICHAEL O'HARE](#)

UPDATED: December 11, 2024 at 5:42 AM PST

BART is running out of federal assistance and threatens drastic service cuts if we don't make up a \$350 million annual deficit. The pandemic-devastated ridership is still not at half of pre-COVID levels. But even if usage had recovered, the way we pay for transit is simply nuts.

Now would be a good time to come to our senses, pay for transit operations entirely through taxes and give rides away for free — the way we give away access to sidewalks and parks.

The 2026 BART budget foresees about \$1.1 billion a year for operating costs. Fares cover about \$310 million of that, while emergency assistance that will end that year provides another \$294 million. (Capital costs for equipment are covered by separate taxes that retire bonds.)

Replacing the fares and emergency assistance would cost each person in the three BART counties — Alameda, Contra Costa and San Francisco — about \$3.23 a week, less than your Monday latte. A free San Francisco Muni would be more expensive by about \$7 a week, but it would provide about three times as many rides as BART.

In general, it's good for people to pay for what they use up, such as food, clothing and gas. But why charge someone to ride a train that is going from Rockridge to Powell Street station whether they get on or not?

Why should people who never ride the train pay for it? One reason is that it's good for them: Less road congestion means less pollution and less time sitting in traffic, and BART is way greener than even your electric car.

Current pricing encourages people to drive. Two couples can drive from the East Bay to San Francisco and back for a show and park for less than BART charges. If it's free, maybe we'll go downtown to work and shop more and not compete for parking when we arrive. A lively downtown, whether in San Francisco or elsewhere, is good for everyone's quality of life.

Until the train is full, that ride (once we decide to run the train in the first place) is what economists call a non-rival good, something that I can consume and leave no less for you, such as clean air, a common language, good health, friendly neighbors and the internet.

But what if the trains become congested? Consider treating transit like public education. When enrollment swells, we don't start charging tuition for public schools — we build more classrooms, hire more teachers and keep it free. BART getting crowded? Run more trains!

Walking and using transit is a civilized and humane way to live, good for both personal and community health. For decades, Los Angelenos lived a sort of curdled American dream of driving alone, cheap gas and free parking. But even they have come to their senses. Free transit also serves social justice: Low-income people without cars need to get to jobs, shopping and services such as medical care.

Not collecting fares also saves money. How much are we paying for those fancy new BART gates? Muni found that it cost a quarter of the fares just to collect them.

Has anyone tried providing transit free? Yes! Lots of places have free transit for youth, the elderly and low-income citizens. And 35 U.S. cities — including Boston and Richmond, Va. — and the country of Luxembourg have done away with fares entirely or partially.

Worried about crime and loitering? Deal with them the same way we manage it in any other public space. Maybe spring for extra cameras? I would happily up my \$3.23 weekly BART bite by another buck for more cleaning and more frequent trains.

Now is the time to invest in our environment and our quality of life.

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Originally Published: December 11, 2024 at 5:30 AM PST*