

Does the Marin Transportation System Shut Out People of Color?

By Ericka Erickson

A recent Texas Institute of Transportation study confirms what many rush hour commuters in the Bay Area have long suspected—traffic congestion here is the second worst in the nation, Los Angeles being the worst.¹ Specifically, in the North Bay, Marin County has logged the largest percent increase in traffic in the Bay Area between 2005 and 2007; up 20 percent from 2004.²

A boom in Marin County employment has a great deal to do with the traffic crunch. As jobs in Marin grew by 8.5 percent, the number of commuters from outside the county rose to 40 percent.³ Since the growth in employment opportunities was not paralleled by an increase in affordable and subsidized housing in the county, a large part of Marin County's workforce is forced to live in neighboring counties and commute to work.

There are also other, historical reasons for the county's traffic predicaments. In 1961, a plan to run BART (Bay Area Rapid Transport) through Marin County was turned down owing to the county's population being too small to support the tax base needed for the project. Since then, although the tax base has grown considerably, county residents have turned down three other transportation measures (in 1990, 1998 and 2006) out of a reluctance to pay for public transit.⁴ The implication being, Marin residents want to keep their community isolated. Additionally, there was a fear that if BART went through the North Bay, property values would deteriorate, the county's economy would weaken, and minorities from "undesirable" neighborhoods would enter Marin more freely, leading to a potential rise in crime. Today, Marin's failure to deal with transit-related issues has given rise to serious problems around transportation, both within and to and from the county.

The Marin-East Bay Divide

There is no light rail, ferry, train, bicycle path, or cable car that connects East Bay neighborhoods to anywhere in Marin. So, commuters from the East Bay

have two choices: drive a car across the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge, or take a bus.

Golden Gate Transit, the only major bus line in Marin County, runs two bus routes—40 and 42—from the Del Norte BART station in Richmond to the transit hub in San Rafael. The routes were launched in 1991 to connect the under-utilized work force in Contra Costa County with employment opportunities in Marin County.⁵ Routes 40 and 42, however, are not a commuter's ideal option as the buses snail through Richmond neighborhoods instead of using the freeways, or the much faster Richmond Parkway.

A one-way trip from Del Norte to San Rafael on Route 40 or 42 can take 45 minutes to an hour even without the rush hour traffic. By comparison, a car commute from Richmond to San Rafael takes around 25 minutes. What's more, the buses run approximately once every 40 minutes and service stops at 8:00 PM. This is not very convenient for the low wage workers, such as housecleaners, nannies, cooks, and gardeners, who use Golden Gate Transit the most but do not work the usual nine-to-five day.

Nearly 658,500 people rode Golden Gate Transit buses in July 2008—about 9.6 percent more than in July 2007—and 80 percent of this ridership was during peak commuting hours.⁶ A majority of the bus riders are minorities and/or low wage workers and nearly 45 percent are persons of color.⁷ In fact, 25 percent of Golden Gate Transit riders make less than \$25,000 per household annually.⁸ The projected job growth in the North Bay, 30 percent, is in occupations that pay at or just above the minimum wage of \$6.75 per hour.⁹

Getting Around (or not) Within Marin

Traveling within Marin County is not that much better than traveling to and from it. Golden Gate Transit is the main bus line, heavily utilized by the Canal neighborhood, which is isolated from the rest of Marin by a waterway and the interconnecting free-ways of Highway 101 and Interstate 580.

Demographically, the community is 70 percent Hispanic and over 15 percent of Canal residents live below the poverty line, compared to less than eight percent for the rest of the county. The number of households in the Canal without access to a car is dramatically higher than in the rest of Marin County, so Canal residents are twice as likely to use public transit than the rest of Marin.¹⁰ At the same time, the neighborhood has very limited resources, such as grocery stores, banks, hospitals, and schools, which makes it extremely inconvenient for residents of this isolated segment of Marin to access essential services and goods in a timely and practical manner like any other resident of Marin County.

Routes 35 and 36, the two bus lines that operate through the Canal, are the most heavily used in Marin. These buses are often crowded and late, come too infrequently and do not operate early in the morning or late at night. The disparity in transportation access between the low income and more affluent regions of Marin are more than apparent and should be rectified.

Transportation as Basic Right

Traffic congestion and accessibility have become central issues affecting Marin today. The Metropolitan Transportation Committee recently released funding to Golden Gate Transit to improve Routes 40 and 42. The service is now expected to run until midnight, seven days a week, and offer several limited-stop buses. This new and improved bus route from the East Bay to Marin will be a more streamlined commute and the expanded hours will benefit low-wage workers who commonly work late at night. It is hoped that service funding will be allocated to help expand the bus line over the next three years, including an increase of 28 to 33 roundtrips during peak commute hours.¹¹

The funding to Routes 40 and 42 is a good start but more needs to be done. Extra buses are needed

from other cities in the East Bay as well. Traveling from Berkeley or Oakland to the Del Norte Bart Station to catch a bus into Marin can be a long and arduous task. There is a serious need for direct bus lines from Berkeley and Oakland to Marin for workers commuting from those cities. Moreover, since these cities connect to BART and other fully functional bus lines, like the AC Transit, Marin County would then be connected to the Bay Area at large through a network of transit services.

Future funding should also be directed towards offering more incentives for car commuters to ride the bus. A dedicated bus only lane on the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge, for example, would make the trip dramatically shorter. Making the buses themselves more commuter friendly with Wi-Fi connections and plush seats would also attract more riders. A good start in this direction would be to use Marin voter-approved Measure A funds primarily for local transit systems—within Marin in districts like the Canal, and to East Bay cities.

It's time for Marin County and transportation experts to take serious steps towards resolving the conundrum of the county's traffic nightmare. Available transportation obviously has become insufficient to meet the needs of commuters and residents. Adding more bus lines through communities like the Canal and from the East Bay is imperative not only to alleviate traffic congestion but also to meet the basic needs of these individuals who make up Marin's primary workforce. ■

Endnotes

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