



Bay Area Transportation Working Group (BATWG)



Silicon Valley
Taxpayers Association
— "A Voice for the Taxpayer"

TRANSDEF



**Solano
County
Taxpayers
Association**

Alameda County Taxpayers' Association
Incorporated June 17, 1938

December 17, 2024

VIA E-MAIL ONLY

Bay Area Toll Authority
c/o Chair Alfredo Pedroza
San Francisco, California
info@bayareametro.gov

Re: Coalition of Transportation and Taxpayer Advocacy Organizations Against the Bay Area Toll Authority's December 2024 Proposed Toll Increase. Public Comment for Administrative Record of BATA Resolution No. 184. December 18, 2024 BATA Board Meeting, Agenda Item No. 4a.

To Chair Pedroza and BATA/MTC Commissioners:

We are a coalition of taxpayer and transportation advocacy organizations that oppose the proposed \$2.50 Bay Area bridge toll increase on the seven bridges controlled by BATA. We believe that BATA Resolution No. 184 should be tabled until after MTC/BATA makes significant accounting and financial practices reforms concerning toll bridge revenues and expenditures, as discussed below.

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Dan Borenstein's December 8, 2024 column in the *Mercury News/East Bay Times* titled "Problematic Accounting: MTC commingles voter-approved bridge toll funds" exposed MTC/BATA's deceptive financial practices and concluded:

Right now, because of the commingling, the commission lacks the data to intelligently evaluate the toll hike. The plan should be shelved until the agency's finances are transparently accounted for.

... The proposed hike is not slated to begin until 2026, so there's no need to rush the plan through. Until the tracking data is available, the bridge toll hike should be tabled.

Another column by Dan Borenstein in the *Mercury News/East Bay Times*, "Proposed \$2.50 Increase: MTC slush fund undermines toll hike claims," published on December 17, 2024, concluded:

[W]ithout transparent bookkeeping, agency commissioners and the public cannot intelligently evaluate whether the additional \$2.50 toll is needed. ...

The commissioners should not prematurely ram through the toll increase, which would not begin for more than a year anyhow. They should instead demand an end to the comingling of funds and insist on proper accounting, including long-range projections of the available money and liabilities for each of the toll components. Only then could commissioners determine if the hike is justified.

We agree. We have attached copies of those columns to this letter so that your Board may consider them as part of the Administrative Record for this toll increase decision.

We call for creation of an independent MTC Office of Inspector General (OIG) to oversee internal audits and investigations into the billions of dollars that MTC, BATA, and related entities spend annually. In 2017, as conditions of the SB 1 tax and Regional Measure 3 toll increases, the Legislature established inspectors general at Caltrans and BART to root out waste, fraud, and abuse in transportation projects and programs. An OIG has overseen the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority since 1983. The time has come for an OIG to regulate MTC, too. If MTC does not voluntarily form an OIG, then the Legislature should impose one.

MTC's deceptive accounting practices concerning toll bridge revenues and expenditures are akin to the "three-card monte" scam. Like the card trick, MTC engages in sleights-of-hand designed to justify ever higher tolls while obscuring the funds it quietly siphons off.

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BATA/MTC claims the \$2.50 increase is necessary for “bridge operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation.” But MTC’s 2024 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (Schedule 11) demonstrates that existing tolls cover 392 percent of operating expenses. Before the proposed toll increase is approved, BATA needs to explain further some categories on Schedule 11, such as the composition of the “Services and charges” line item of “Operating expenses.” (A copy of Schedule 11 is attached.)

Bay Area bridge tolls have increased much more rapidly than general inflation over the past 20 years. In 2004, the bridge toll was \$3. Beginning January 1, 2025, the toll will be \$8. Had tolls increased with the Bay Area’s inflation rate, the toll today would be just \$5.30.

Of the current \$7 bridge toll, \$3 is earmarked for “toll bridge seismic retrofit work.” (See FAQs No. 4.) BATA added two of those “seismic retrofit” dollars in 2007 and 2010 to cover cost overruns for the new Bay Bridge Eastern Span, which infamously spiraled billions of dollars above budget. BATA deemed the seismic retrofit program complete in 2019, but BATA will collect the \$3 “seismic retrofit” surcharge in perpetuity, long after the debt is paid off. The public needs a full accounting of how these “seismic retrofit” dollars have been used, are now being used, and will be used over the next 40 years. BATA should disclose the long-term plan for the “seismic retrofit” revenue stream. As the debt is paid off, we suspect that the existing \$3 could be used for bridge operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation instead of the proposed toll increase.

At the same time it is pleading for higher tolls, BATA has declared that \$550 million of existing bridge tolls are “excess” to its needs (“AB 1171” funds) and therefore are available for diversion to projects that have nothing to do with toll bridges. With this supposed “excess,” MTC recently funded the Valley Link project outside the Bay Area into San Joaquin County, a SMART train extension in Santa Rosa, and a Vacaville intermodal station. Effectively the \$2.50 toll increase will be imposed to protect this slush fund for MTC Commissioners’ parochial “pork barrel” projects that are nominally connected to Regional Measure 2. (See MTC Resolution No. 3914, Revised.)

In 2018, BATA placed the last toll increase before voters in Regional Measure 3 (RM3). Myriad working class communities voted “No,” including the East Oakland flatlands, Richmond, Antioch, Pittsburg, Vallejo, American Canyon, Rohnert Park, San Leandro, Newark, and Hayward. Most residents of those communities probably aren’t aware of the existence of MTC or BATA, let alone know about the proposed toll increase and how to communicate their opinions about it. Many likely are struggling with the Bay Area’s already high cost-of-living, coping with ever-rising housing, food, utilities, and transportation expenses. MTC must recognize their opposition to RM3 and hear their strained voices. MTC commissioners who represent these areas (Alfredo Pedroza, Jim Sperring, Federal Glover, Sue Noack, Nate Miley, Rebecca Kaplan, Marilyn Ezzy Ashcraft, David Rabbitt, Victoria Fleming) would betray their constituents by unconditionally supporting the \$2.50 toll increase at the December 18, 2024 BATA meeting. They preach “equity,” but in practice sell out their own people, with no political accountability.

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Opposition to Charging the Full Toll to HOV-2 Vehicles During Commute Hours on the San Mateo and Dumbarton Bridges.

We also oppose BATA's related action to begin charging the full toll for HOV-2 vehicles during commute hours on the San Mateo and Dumbarton bridges. We are concerned that BATA's selfish motivation to generate revenue might be overpowering the traffic engineering, demand control, and equitable considerations that had determined HOV lane operations and policy before the advent of "high-occupancy toll (HOT)" and "express" lanes. BATA should first study HOV-2 vehicle usage on the San Mateo and Dumbarton bridges. Many of those HOV-2 vehicles could be East Bay low-income workers who commute together to jobsites on the Peninsula. They might not be able to find a third person for their vehicle due to worksite locations and work hours. If HOV-2 vehicles were charged full tolls (instead of the current 50% toll), they no longer would have a direct financial incentive to continue their HOV-2 carpools. They might break up their carpools and join the solo drivers who congest the bridges.

Slide no. 35 at the November 13, 2024 webinar suggests that BATA/MTC is planning in the long run to charge HOV-2 vehicles "50% Toll" to use all "Bay Area Express Lanes," including "Express Lanes" that now charge HOV-2 vehicles no tolls. Many "Express Lanes" originally were planned, approved, and constructed as HOV-2 carpool lanes. HOV lanes were built to facilitate travel by HOV-2 vehicles. Most of the HOV-2 "express lanes" are in parts of the Bay Area where traffic conditions do not warrant HOV-3+ restrictions. We are deeply concerned that the "HOV-3+" restrictions could be extended throughout the nine-county Bay Area, discouraging HOV-2 vehicles by forcing them to pay tolls to access "managed lanes" everywhere in the region.

We would appreciate a thoughtful response to the concerns that we have raised in this joint letter.

Respectfully submitted,

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Attachments:

Daniel Borenstein, "Problematic Accounting: MTC commingles voter-approved bridge toll funds," *Mercury News/East Bay Times*, December 8, 2024, p. A8.

Daniel Borenstein, "Proposed \$2.50 Increase: MTC slush fund undermines toll hike claims," *Mercury News/East Bay Times*, December 17, 2024, p. A6.

MTC's 2024 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (Schedule 11)

Sharon Ryan: president and publisher

Frank Pine: executive editor

Daniel Borenstein: editorial page editor

Cartoonist's take

SHENEMAN THE STAR-LEDGER



DREW SHENEMAN — THE STAR-LEDGER OF NEWARK

ENSURING SAFETY

Danville needs to keep bicycle commission to protect riders

By Bruce Bilodeau

Bicycling is a growing sport and an increasingly common mode of transportation as more people leave their cars at home and jump on a bicycle to commute to work, run errands, get exercise and visit local shops and restaurants.

Increased bicycle traffic has resulted in more collisions between cars and bicycles. The severity of cyclists' injuries is compounded by the increased weight and speed of e-bikes and e-scooters.

The town of Danville addressed the threats to the safety of the San Ramon Valley cycling community by creating a Bicycle Advisory Commission in 2022. But now, as e-bikes explode in popularity, the town council wants to demote the commission to a board under the Parks, Recreation & Arts Commission. In my opinion, this will dilute the effectiveness of this bike safety group and result in increased risk for cyclists of all ages that ride through Danville.

Danville is a key Bay Area cycling location. Cyclists come from all over the Bay Area to ride the roads and trails in the San Ramon Valley. They are attracted by the relatively quiet residential streets, the Iron Horse Trail and nearby destinations such as Mount Diablo. In 2019, nearly 270,000 cyclists rode past the East Bay Regional Park District's bike counter on the Iron Horse Trail in Danville, an average of 21,900 per month.

But Danville is not as safe for cyclists as one might imagine.

Since 2009 there have been 201 bike vs. vehicle collisions in Danville, averaging 16 per year since 2018, for a crash rate of 36 per 100,000, almost three times the U.S. average. Comparing Danville with other Bay Area suburban towns, Danville ranks at or near the top in crash rate.

And it's likely to get worse. According to a paper published by UCSF, injuries in the United States of e-bike and e-scooter riders increased from 751 in 2017 to 23,493 in 2022.

Recognizing the increasing safety risks, Danville's town council approved a Bicycle Master Plan in July 2021. A year later they established the Bicycle Advisory Commission, consisting of six experienced cyclists to help implement the Bicycle Master Plan.

These six volunteer commissioners advise the town council, collaborate with the town's transportation staff and review key capital improvement projects to help improve bike facilities and safety for all road users, including pedestrians.

During the past two years, the commission has been working with the town transportation department to improve facilities for cyclists. And the data shows that bicycle crash rate has declined since 2021.

But despite this progress and the increasing threats to safety, the Danville town council in May considered reducing the commission to a board under the Parks, Recreation & Arts Commission.

A bike commission is unique among town commissions because it prioritizes the safety of residents and visitors. Working with the transportation department,

which is primarily concerned with automobile traffic, the bike commission adds a critical focus on bicycle and scooter safety.

In contrast, the Parks, Recreation & Arts Commission focuses on acquiring, developing and maintaining park and recreation facilities and providing leisure and human service programs for town residents. While it provides valuable services for Danville residents, it's not focused on the critical transportation and safety planning and implementation issues that the bike commission addresses. Moving this critical safety focus and advocacy to the Parks, Recreation & Arts Commission dilutes its effectiveness.

After some heated discussion, the council delayed until this fall the decision to either keep the commission as is, eliminate it altogether or minimize its role by melding it with the parks commission.

Maintaining Danville's Bicycle Advisory Commission in its current form best ensures continued focus on critical safety issues, close coordination with transportation department staff, and well-informed implementation of improvements for all road, sidewalk, trail and path users.

Bruce Bilodeau, a retired geologist, is an experienced cyclist, former coach and team director of the San Ramon Valley Mountain Bike Club and the current chair of the Danville Bicycle Advisory Commission. The opinions here are his own and are not expressed on behalf of the commission.

Letters to the editor

Does story herald a new Gilded Age?

Re: "I don't know how we got so lucky" (Page A1, Dec. 2).

The Gilded Age in the United States was a period from about the late 1870s to the late 1890s, which involved materialism and excess wealth for some. Newspaper "society pages" began to feature stories of the rich and famous.

Also, apparently, in the 1920s, newspaper society pages regularly covered the lavish parties, weddings, fashion choices and social events of the rich and famous.

But in 2024, why would the East Bay Times want to do a story about a couple who are able to buy a \$3.7 million home, one that must be in a "good" school district and have a good-sized backyard for their dog and growing teenager?

Are we back to admiring the story of such a couple, when most in the Bay Area cannot afford to buy even a starter

home?

Why would we want to go there in our daily newspaper?

— George Fulmore
Emeryville

Raw milk producers endanger consumers

Re: "Dairy standing by its products" (Page A1, Dec. 4).

There is probably no faster way to destroy a beneficial industry than by allowing the sale of raw, unpasteurized milk.

Exposing children to salmonella, blood infections and other horrors is unconscionable and unnecessary. Safe, pasteurized milk contains no added sugars plus five times as much protein as oat milk and 10 times the protein of almond milk.

Nevertheless, a terrified public — believing that all milk is unsafe — will flee to these products unless the producers of raw milk begin protecting their customers with practices that have been in place

since 1895.

Milk drinkers and cheese lovers need to contact regulatory agencies now, before dairy after dairy collapses due to the irresponsible actions of one or two producers.

— Robbie See
Pleasanton

Take op-ed's positive message to heart

Re: "A better state government is best defense" (Page A6, Nov. 27).

How refreshing! Bob Stonebrook's op-ed was refreshingly positive.

Instead of the vitriol that usually get published lamenting the outcome of our recent election, he actually provided some positive, helpful ideas for us to use to move forward.

Implementing his ideas will surely result in better outcomes for all of us than the carping we've resorted to so far.

— John Griggs
Danville

PROBLEMATIC ACCOUNTING

MTC commingles voter-approved bridge toll funds

About \$73 million of Bay Area bridge toll money that voters approved in 2018 for public transit and freeway improvement projects has instead been diverted to pay for maintaining the bridges.

That's just one small example of how officials of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission have for years been commingling different portions of the tolls for the region's seven state-owned bridges.

The troubling financial practices came to light as the agency sought our editorial page support for its plan to once again raise Bay Area bridge tolls.

The automobile toll is slated to increase from \$7 to \$8 at the start of 2025. A commission committee overseeing bridge tolls is scheduled to vote this coming week and the full commission board the following week on a proposal to add another \$2.50.

Right now, because of the commingling, the commission lacks the data to intelligently evaluate the toll hike. The plan should be shelved until the agency's finances are transparently accounted for.

Latest toll hike plan

The proposal calls for 50-cent annual increases starting in 2026 that would boost the cost of an automobile trip to \$10.50 by 2030. To understand whether the increase is needed, I asked to see the financial tracking of the different portions of the toll the agency now collects.

District officials responded that they pool the money rather than budget it separately. That's stunning and problematic because the different toll components are designated for very different purposes.

The first dollar, approved by voters in 1988, was designated for operating, maintaining and replacing the bridges, as well as improvements to BART, Caltrain and San Francisco Muni.

Another \$3 — approved in \$1 increments by the Legislature, in 1997 and 2007, and MTC, in 2010 — was supposed to help cover the cost of seismic retrofitting, including the replacement of the Bay Bridge's eastern span.

And voters in 2004 and 2018 approved toll increases totaling \$4 to help fund transit service operations and freeway, transit, bicycle and pedestrian projects, including BART's seismic retrofit, new rail cars, and extension to Warm Springs Station and San Jose; the Caldecott Tunnel fourth bore; and the eBART rail extension in eastern Contra Costa County.

The voter material for the 2018 ballot proposal, Regional Measure 3, listed the projects but didn't mention that the money would go toward maintaining or rehabilitating the bridges. Indeed, backers emphasized at the time that the measure would fund projects off the bridge to reduce congestion on it.

But apparently voters should have read the fine print in state law. Rebecca Long, the agency's director of legislation and public affairs, and Derek Hansel, the chief financial officer, insist the law allows them to use any of the toll money for any bridge maintenance, construction and improvement projects.

Worse, none of the components of the tolls has an expiration date, but the list of projects they are supposed to fund is finite. So Long and Hansel argue that there will eventually be more money than projects, leaving them free to use excess for any bridge purpose.

Indeed, they say, they are free to use money from the individual programs even before the promised projects are completed. The commission's only obligation, they say, is to provide the funding for the projects at some point.

\$10 billion of debt

They also argue that the toll revenues must be pooled because they are used as security for selling bonds. That's a bogus rationale for the lack of transparency.

Aggregating the numbers for the bond market is understandable. And it's no different from what most government agencies do. But that's not an excuse for failing to track how the borrowed money is spent for the separate programs.

The commission has nearly \$10 billion of bond debt. Not only does the agency fail to track the use of the money by program, but it also fails to apportion the liability.

The result is that there's no way to know what part of the financial obligations for each of the programs has been fulfilled, nor when it will be.

As the commission considers hiking tolls further — again permanently — for bridge operations, maintenance and rehabilitation, it should be asking itself how much of the current toll money could now or in the future be used to offset the need for such a large increase.

But, to determine that, commissioners would need an accounting and projections that separate the funding and spending by each of the components of the bridge tolls.

To his credit, Hansel, who took over as CFO in 2022, says it would be "good practice" to track the revenues and expenditures by each program. He says he has the information to do that for Regional Measure 3. And he has told others he will need a couple of months to figure it out for the other programs, which began long before he arrived.

Commissioners should insist that he finish that as quickly as possible to provide transparency to the public and ensure commissioners make a well-informed decision about further increasing tolls.

The proposed hike is not slated to begin until 2026, so there's no need to rush the plan through. Until the tracking data is available, the bridge toll hike should be tabled.

Reach Editorial Page
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An MTC proposal calls for 50-cent annual bridge toll increases starting in 2026 that would boost the cost of an automobile trip to \$10.50 by 2030.

ARIC CRABB
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

PROPOSED \$2.50 INCREASE

MTC slush fund undermines toll hike claims

Part of a \$3 Bay Area toll increase that voters approved in 2018 for public transit and free-way improvements is effectively being used as a slush fund for bridge maintenance.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission’s legally questionable diversion betrays promises made to voters. It affects the funding source for \$4.5 billion of capital projects required by the nine-county ballot measure, known as Regional Measure 3.

Earlier this month, I reported that the agency had diverted about \$73 million from RM3 to maintenance on the Bay Area’s seven state-owned bridges. Further interviews and new information show that the scheme was not just a one-time rerouting of money.

It’s much bigger. The scheme involves using bond issues to borrow more money than is needed, and for longer than necessary, to fund RM3 projects — and then divert the excess funds to other purposes.

The magnitude of the diversion is still impossible to determine because the agency comingles — and fails to separately account for — the different portions of the toll on state-owned bridges in the Bay Area.

RM3 provides \$2 of the current \$7 auto toll and, starting Jan. 1, \$3 of the new \$8 toll. The remaining portions are from separate authorizations for other purposes.

MTC’s comingling of these different portions affects both cash revenue from bridge tolls, expected to be more than \$800 million this year, and liability for the \$11 billion of borrowing through bonds the agency has issued since 2001, for which it still owes nearly \$10 billion.

The comingling also makes it impossible to determine whether the diversion is limited to the RM3 portion of toll revenues, or if other portions are also being misdirected or leveraged for excessive borrowing.

Another toll hike

Despite the opaque finances, the commission on Wednesday will consider raising tolls another \$2.50 by 2030, bringing the total to \$10.50. The proposed increase, which would involve 50-cent annual increases starting in 2026, is supposed to be for bridge maintenance and rehabilitation.

But without transparent bookkeeping, agency commissioners and the public cannot intelligently evaluate whether the additional \$2.50 toll is needed.

The agency’s 18 voting commissioners are almost all Bay Area elected county supervisors, mayors or city council members. Consequently, their focus is usually on their local jobs, which



Daniel Borenstein
Editorial
Page Editor



RAY CHAVEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Vehicle tolls on Bay Area state-owned bridges will increase to \$8 on Jan. 1. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission on Wednesday will consider increasing it to \$10.50 by 2030.

‘Commissioners should not prematurely ram through the toll increase, which would not begin for more than a year anyhow. They should instead demand an end to the comingling of funds and insist on proper accounting.’

explains why MTC is a heavily staff-driven organization.

The commissioners should not prematurely ram through the toll increase, which would not begin for more than a year anyhow. They should instead demand an end to the comingling of funds and insist on proper accounting, including long-range projections of the available money and liabilities for each of the toll components. Only then could commissioners determine if the hike is justified.

MTC is supposed to dole out and oversee state and federal funding for Bay Area transportation projects. And it’s leading the effort for a 2026 tax increase to bail out BART and other Bay Area transit agencies.

But MTC will have little credibility if it can’t first clean up its own finances.

Toll history

Understanding the slush fund scheme begins with the history of tolls on the seven state-owned Bay Area bridges.

The first dollar, approved by voters in 1988, was designated for operating, maintaining and replacing the bridges, as well as improvements to BART, Caltrain and San Francisco Muni.

Another \$3 — approved in \$1 increments by the Legislature, in 1997 and 2007, and MTC, in 2010 — was supposed to help cover the cost of seismic retrofitting, including the replacement of the Bay Bridge’s eastern span.

In 2004 voters approved a \$1 toll hike and in 2018, with RM3, another \$3 to help fund transit service operations and free-way, transit, bicycle and pedestrian projects, including BART’s seismic retrofit, new rail cars, and extension to Warm Springs Station and San Jose; the Calde-

cott Tunnel fourth bore; and the eBART rail extension in eastern Contra Costa County.

Most of the information the agency has provided in recent weeks pertains to RM3. The \$3 increase was to be phased in with \$1 increases at the start of 2019, 2022 and 2025.

From those RM3 funds, the agency diverted the \$73 million for bridge maintenance. To justify this, Rebecca Long, the agency’s director of legislation and public affairs, and Derek Hansel, the chief financial officer, say that state law allows the agency to use any toll money at any time for any bridge maintenance, construction and improvement projects.

What voters were told

Voters in 2018 were told a very different story. The ballot measure resulted from months of negotiations by state and local lawmakers, much of it centered on whether the East Bay would pay a disproportionately higher share of the toll hikes while the South Bay would receive a windfall.

But, despite the haggling, the purpose of the measure was clear: It would fund projects off the bridges to reduce congestion on the bridges and elsewhere.

For the official ballot booklet mailed to voters, MTC prepared a 22-page description of the measure. The only mention of money going toward bridge maintenance comes at the very end — and with restrictions MTC has not yet met.

Specifically, under the state law enabling MTC to put RM3 on the ballot, the \$3 toll increase could be hiked further for inflation, but only after the \$3 had been phased in completely, which won’t happen until Jan. 1. That inflation-adjustment por-

tion could be used for bridge maintenance and rehabilitation, as well as additional funding for capital projects in RM3.

Nowhere in the ballot measure material is there mention of using portions of RM3 revenue beyond the inflation adjustment for bridge maintenance and rehabilitation.

Lawyers and judges might someday need to sort out whether the specific provisions of state law pertaining to RM3 supersede the other parts of the law that MTC is citing to justify the diversion of funds.

But let’s be clear: MTC’s use of RM3 money for bridge work, apart from a future inflation adjustment, is a dishonorable breach of faith with the voters.

The slush fund

It’s not only the diversion of the \$73 million from RM3 funds that’s problematic. It’s also the slush fund that MTC has created using RM3 money.

Essentially, the agency is leveraging future RM3 revenues to borrow more money than it needs for the measure’s projects — and then diverting the excess elsewhere.

According to numbers provided by Hansel, the chief financial officer, the RM3 portion of the bridge toll, since it was first implemented in 2019, has raised about \$866 million. After subtracting the 18% portion that is supposed to go for transit operations and administration, a net of about \$710 million could be applied to the \$4.5 billion in capital projects.

After Jan. 1, when RM3 reaches its full \$3, the measure will bring in about \$271 million annually that can be used for RM3 capital projects. Put another way, the RM3 portion

of the toll will raise the money needed to fund the required capital projects in another 14 years.

MTC is just beginning to fund those RM3 capital projects with outlays of \$234 million as of October. In other words, so far, they’re ahead by nearly \$500 million. It suggests the program could be funded by cash on hand or, if there is a surge in the projects, some short-term borrowing to bridge a cashflow gap.

Instead, despite all the RM3 cash collected, MTC this year issued \$211 million of bonds for RM3 projects — bonds to be repaid in 20 years. And they plan to issue more in the future.

It’s ridiculous. Why issue long-term debt on a rolling basis that could extend decades into the future when the agency should have enough money to fund the entire set of required RM3 projects in just 14 years?

The answer is that allows them to create the slush fund — to free up more RM3 revenues for other purposes, specifically bridge maintenance and improvement projects, even though that’s not what voters were told RM3 money would be used for.

With the \$73 million diverted for bridge maintenance, MTC has already begun to use the extra money that way.

If the agency had created segregated funds, it might be appropriate to loan money from the RM3 fund to bridge maintenance with the proviso it would be recouped. But that’s not what’s happening.

Now what?

It’s taken weeks to see the picture of what is going on with the money for RM3.

The melding of revenues from and debt liability attributable to the portions of bridge toll revenue make it nearly impossible to ascertain whether other parts of the toll revenue are also not being spent as intended.

The problem is exacerbated because each component of the toll is permanent, but the expenditures in many of the cases are for finite projects. That eventually leaves extra money.

If MTC staff is correct that it can use any toll funds for bridge maintenance and rehabilitation expenditures, then does it need to again permanently increase tolls, this time by another \$2.50? Alternatively, if it raises tolls for bridge work, should it start phasing out other toll components for completed projects?

Without annual projections of income, expenditures and debt liability for each of the toll components, commissioners cannot demonstrate that another toll increase is needed.

Until they can do that, they should table any talk of yet another toll hike.

Reach Editorial Page Editor Daniel Borenstein at dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Letters to the editor

Oakland must release film incentive funds

When a film production receives \$1 in financial incentives, it spends \$13.66 in the local economy.

Let that sink in.

That’s a return on investment of more than 1,000%.

In Oakland, we have an opportunity to transform a modest investment into a robust economic engine — and we’re hesitating.

What if the path to economic recovery is not through backpedaling and austerity, but through targeted strategic investment?

The City Council unanimously approved an incentive July 16. Now, they need to release the money.

This film incentive helps Oakland do more with even more.

It costs less than \$600,000 to implement, and there are already signed letters of intent worth tens of millions of dollars spent here ... if they do receive the incentive.

This kind of ROI is back-to-

basics finance.

Please reach out to your council member and ask them to release the Film Incentive funds at their Tuesday meeting.

— Max Blum
Oakland

BART benefits riders, non-riders alike

Re: “Don’t tap burdened taxpayers for BART” (Page A6, Dec. 13).

In his letter to the editor, George Mathews objects to “people who, for the most part, never use the system,” by which he means people who never ride BART, being taxed to pay for it.

But people around the Bay Area certainly use BART’s benefits when they drive to and from work or are otherwise on the roads.

If all travelers drove cars instead of taking BART (or public transit generally) the roads would be far, far more congested than they are now. And they are congested.

Further, travel by car is subsidized by all, since gas taxes don’t cover the costs of road

construction or maintenance. And hybrids and EVs don’t pay as much — or even any — gas taxes.

BART is a public good that benefits all who live in the Bay Area.

— Peter Nicoll
Dublin

State should follow N.Y.’s lead on pet sales

Re: “Bay Area pet lovers battle animal overpopulation” (Page B1, Dec. 15).

In response to the article on pet population, there is some good news out of New York, a new state law banning the sale of dogs, cats and rabbits by pet shops.

The law will also allow pet stores to charge shelters rent to use their space for adoptions. The new law also aims to stop abusive pet breeders.

Others should follow suit. Here in California, late February is the deadline for the introduction of new bills.

— Eric Mills
Oakland

Knee-jerk Trump hatred should stop now

Re: “Person of the year poor example of president” (Page A8, Dec. 15).

The Time magazine person of the year is not an award of praise or commendation.

The title goes to “the person or persons who most affected the news and our lives, for good or ill, and embodied what was important about the year, for better or for worse,” as former Time Managing Editor Walter Isaacson wrote in the 1998 issue. Previous winners include Adolf Hitler (1938), Joseph Stalin (1939 and 1942), Ruhollah Khomeini (1979) and Vladimir Putin (2007) — hardly a list of do-gooders or positive influencers.

I did not vote for Donald Trump, but 77 million fellow citizens thought he was the best choice for president at this time. And it is past time to tone down the rhetoric and the hatred.

I have no problem that Steve Lake does not respect the man, but we should respect the vote and the office that Trump was

elected to. I did not vote for him, but I now pray for his success.

— Craig Rieger
Concord

Harris has little to take pride in

Re: “Harris should take pride in her tireless work” (Page A8, Dec. 15).

Although Kamala Harris had only 107 days to pitch her candidacy for president, she had some 1,353 days worth of tireless work behind her as the vice president.

The writer states that the Dec 10 article (“Harris fails to ignite Bay Area”) did not acknowledge all that Harris did. The question is what did she do to make life better for Americans?

When asked what her weakness is, Harris said her strength is her weakness. How is she strong if that is her weakness?

What is one objective piece of information that supports her doing a good job whether as the vice president or in her campaign? She lost all battleground states.

— Kirit Shah
Fremont

Metropolitan Transportation Commission

Schedule of Operating Revenues and Expenses (\$ in thousands) - BATA Proprietary Fund - By Bridge

For the Year Ended June 30, 2024

Schedule 11

	Carquinez Bridge	Benicia- Martinez Bridge	Antioch Bridge	Richmond-San Rafael Bridge	San Francisco- Oakland Bay Bridge	San Mateo- Hayward Bridge	Dumbarton Bridge	Total
Operating revenues								
Toll revenues collected	\$ 132,505	\$ 130,745	\$ 22,185	\$ 88,844	\$ 258,846	\$ 105,799	\$ 62,646	\$ 801,570
Other operating revenues	6,331	6,735	1,266	3,787	10,365	4,496	2,593	35,573
Total operating revenues	138,836	137,480	23,451	92,631	269,211	110,295	65,239	837,143
Operating expenses								
Operating expenditures-by Caltrans & Transbay JPA	510	492	230	346	6,634	367	231	8,810
Services and charges	24,731	24,490	4,177	16,501	47,955	19,647	11,621	149,122
Allocations to other agencies	8,891	8,805	1,502	5,932	17,241	7,064	4,178	53,613
Depreciation	286	284	48	191	555	227	135	1,726
Total operating expenses	34,418	34,071	5,957	22,970	72,385	27,305	16,165	213,271
Operating income	\$ 104,418	\$ 103,409	\$ 17,494	\$ 69,661	\$ 196,826	\$ 82,990	\$ 49,074	\$ 623,872