

By Tina Martin
CONTRIBUTOR

OPEN FORUM

Public transport is a way of life in the Bay Area

60-year Muni rider makes case for passing regional transit measures



Courtesy of Tina Martin

Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Tina Martin meet at the Move Bay Area transit summit in S.F. on Aug. 28. Martin writes that passing city and regional transit measures in November is vital for the Bay Area.

Am I, at 80, too old to be a transit nerd? I certainly dress like one — BART earrings made from tickets from decades ago, the latest holiday sweater with the Muni worm and earrings depicting a street-car.

This November, San Franciscans will decide whether enthusiasm like mine is matched by the money needed to keep the buses and trains running. Proposition H would provide dedicated funding for Muni, while the regional Proposition RTM would support Muni and other Bay Area transit systems. If the measures fail, service cuts will not be abstractions. They will change whether people can reach work, school, medical appointments, friends — the places that, for so many of us, make a life.

I began needing Muni in 1966, when I was a student and learned San Francisco through its bus routes. By day, I took the 1 California and the 28 19th Avenue from the Richmond to San Francisco State University. At night, Muni carried me all over the city to babysitting jobs that paid \$1 an hour.

After I married and moved to Potrero Hill, I took our toddler— now 47 and an avid transit rider — by bus to Kindergarten at California and Presidio, and to playgroups wherever they met around the city.

More recently, when a friend who lives in the Outer Sunset near Ocean Beach offered to pick me up in his car for a lunch date downtown, I suggested that we take Muni instead.

“I don’t think there’s good transit service in my area,” he said.

It turned out that he lived a block from the L Taraval train. He took it that day — and reached our meeting place 15 minutes early. Now that he can no longer drive, he takes Muni everywhere and has come to depend on the very service he once thought his neighborhood lacked.

I now live near Sloat Boulevard, and I take Muni to the San Francisco Playhouse near Union Square, picnics in Golden Gate Park, Green Apple

Books, medical appointments in Mission Bay, and rallies and hearings at City Hall. After a knee replacement, I discovered that the 5 Fulton bus brought me closer to City Hall than driving and searching for parking could.

For seniors and people with disabilities, fewer routes and longer waits would not be minor inconveniences; they could lead many to curtail their outings, robbing them

and the rest of the city’s residents of the social connection and kindness that bind them together.

When I pushed my sister around in a wheelchair following her hip operation, a bus passenger stood in the doorway to make sure the operator waited for us after I’d gotten one of the wheels stuck in a crack in the sidewalk. Once we boarded, the operator carefully secured the wheelchair. Muni’s

accessibility depends not only on equipment, but on people looking out for one another.

The kindness of strangers is a feature of a Muni ride, not a bug. When I left my Muni bag behind, someone ran to the door to return it to me. When I was recuperating from a knee operation, a friend took Muni from Hayes Valley to my home carrying a jar of borscht she had made for me. Other passengers, having heard where

she needed to get off, called out to make sure she didn’t miss her stop.

I’ve often thought about how riding Muni allows me to be a traveler in my own city, taking note of its rhythms in a way I wouldn’t if I were driving a car. I watch parents interacting with their children. “He loves to ride on Muni!” a father told me as his son proudly led the way aboard.

And a car isn’t always faster than public transit. During a power outage last December, five of us were trying to reach Canela Bistro on Market Street. Three squeezed into a car; a friend and I took Muni. We arrived half an hour before they did, helped by the 49 Van Ness traveling in its dedicated lane — and by not having to find parking.

September is Transit Month in San Francisco and the Bay Area. At a regional transit summit held just days before it began, San Mateo County Supervisor Noelia Corzo recalled that riding the bus was a necessity for her family and that she was called “a bus kid.” She urged us to destigmatize public transportation. That stigma persists even in San Francisco, where some people assume that independence means having a car.

At the same gathering, Rep. Nancy Pelosi told us transit riders, “Our hopes are riding on you.”

No, I’m not too old to be a transit nerd. I know that independence is not a car in the driveway. It is having the whole city within reach — and knowing I can get there on Muni. That is why my newest earrings say “Vote Yes on Prop H” on one side and “Vote Yes on RTM” on the other.

I hope voters will support both measures. Not everyone has to become a transit nerd, but everyone benefits when seniors remain independent, workers and students reach their destinations, families travel affordably and fewer cars crowd our streets.

Tina Martin taught English to speakers of other languages in Tonga, Algeria and Spain, and at City College of San Francisco for 32 years. She is now happily retired.

OPEN FORUM

Prop 38 wrong way to fund medical research

By Jon Fleischman and Steve Maviglio
CONTRIBUTORS

As cancer survivors, we both know the fear that follows a diagnosis, the hope invested in every treatment and the gratitude you feel toward the scientists and physicians whose work gives patients more time.

To us and the millions of patients who have had to face the uncertainty of living with cancer, medical research is not an abstract policy question. It is personal.

As a result, Proposition 38, which would authorize California to borrow \$8.4 billion for immunology and immunotherapy research, might seem like something that the two of us would readily support. But because of how the proposition is crafted, and with research dollars in short supply, we’ll both be voting “no,” even though we represent opposing sides of the political spectrum.

Taxpayers would make payments of \$500 million annually for roughly 25 years on Prop 38’s borrowing, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office. That money comes from the same California budget General Fund that pays for schools, healthcare, wildfire response and other essential services.

Proponents suggest that discoveries resulting from the research could generate enough revenue to offset the state’s costs. As cancer survivors — one of whom underwent experimental treatments and invasive surgery — no one will cheer more loudly than we will if research produces breakthroughs.

But hope is not a repayment plan — and California voters have heard this promise be-

fore.

In 2004, voters authorized \$3 billion in borrowing for stem-cell research, with an estimated taxpayer cost of \$6 billion, including interest. After nearly two decades, the state’s stem-cell agency reported that its royalty fund held just \$15.6 million — less than 0.03% of the estimated cost.

The lesson is not that the research lacked value. It is that scientific value and fiscal repayment are two different things.

The debt is guaranteed. The discoveries and royalties are not.

Prop 38 also directs about half its money — roughly \$4.2 billion — to a single research institute selected under unusually specific eligibility requirements without an open statewide competition.

Gary Michelson, a billionaire and chief financial backer of Prop 38, co-founded the California Institute for Immunology and Immunotherapy, chairs its board and, with his wife, committed \$120 million to support its work. UCLA has confirmed that it is the only nonprofit affiliated with the university that satisfies Prop 38’s requirements.



Lea Suzuki/S.F. Chronicle

Chris Brassell assesses donor cells in 2020 at the immunology lab at Vir Biotech in San Francisco. Prop 38 would authorize California to issue \$8.4 billion in bonds to fund immunology and immunotherapy research.

Imagine either major political party proposing to borrow billions of dollars and writing the qualifications so narrowly that an organization founded and chaired by a principal campaign benefactor appears positioned to collect half the money. The other party would rightly howl.

So should voters. California is already home to a broad immunology and immunotherapy research network. Scientists at Stanford, UCSF, UCLA, the Gladstone Institutes, UC San Diego and independent research centers are pursuing cancer vaccines, engineered immune cells and other approaches with support from the National Institutes of Health and other sponsors. Intellectual property revenues from the

substantial research portfolio outside Prop 38’s funded programs will not generate any revenue to offset taxpayer responsibility for the bond debt. Even for research funded by the proposition, only 10% of the intellectual property revenue can be used to offset the \$500 million to \$600 million yearly taxpayer debt service.

The remaining funds from the bond would be awarded as grants, but representatives of participating institutions would help set priorities and distribute money among organizations represented on a governing council. That is not how California should design an independent, competitive scientific process.

There is a legitimate debate over how much California’s

government should spend to fight cancer and other diseases. But whether you are a conservative, a progressive or a moderate, we should all agree on a few basics: Public money should be distributed through fair competition. Enormous borrowing proposals should be designed around taxpayer interests, not prospective recipients. And ballot measures should not use the emotional power of curing disease to rush voters past the fine print.

Cancer has already taken enough from both of us. We want better treatments, genuine breakthroughs and cures. But that deeply personal hope does not require us to support an unfair financing scheme.

We have spent much of our careers on opposite sides of California’s political battlefield. We disagree frequently, publicly and sometimes enthusiastically.

But Prop 38 has accomplished something increasingly rare in California politics: It has brought us together.

We support scientific research, but we reject Proposition 38.

Jon Fleischman is a longtime conservative political strategist, former executive director of the California Republican Party, publisher of “So, Does It Matter?” on Substack and a cancer survivor. Steve Maviglio is a Democratic political strategist, press secretary to former Gov. Gray Davis, principal of Forza Communications and a cancer survivor.