



BART won't have Dick Nixon to ferry around anymore.

BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, [turns 40-years-old today](#), with the unfortunate anniversary of 9/11. Some historical and financial tidbits:

- The original system was supposed to serve Marin and San Mateo Counties, along with San Francisco, Alameda, and Contra Costa Counties. According to [Stephen Zwerling](#), San Mateo dropped out due to concern that neighboring Santa Clara County, which was not paying into the system, would take advantage of the San Mateo stops. County leaders also felt that the BART taxes would be too high and the benefits from the stations too insignificant. As a result of the loss of the San Mateo revenue base, rural Marin County had to drop out because the system no longer had the regional funds to serve that county across the Golden Gate.
- The City of Berkeley did not want the trains running above the street due to noise and visual impacts (as anyone who's tried to sleep near an above-ground BART line can attest). However, Berkeley had little legal leverage to demand an underground line from BART, so the city voters approved a 1966 bond to pay to underground it themselves. That's why the Ashby, Downtown Berkeley, and North Berkeley stations are underground. By contrast, in places like Los Angeles today, small cities are able to force regional transit agencies to pay for local improvements, like Compton using a lawsuit to get an aerial station on the Blue Line and activists in Crenshaw using the California Public Utilities Commission process to slow down and raise the Expo Line to Culver City. But the Berkeley example seems more fair: if you want local improvements, pay for it yourself.
- As documented by [Mel Webber](#) in 1976, BART's capital costs (i.e. the cost to build the system) were 150% more than its leaders had publicly expected by that year, the operating costs were 475% greater, while ridership was only 50% of what they hoped. Certainly ridership has grown since 1976, but so has the system and its costs.

- BART's per passenger subsidy tops out at over [\\$6 per ride](#).

Today BART is an institution in the Bay Area, with many people (including me) relying on it for travel to work, airports, shopping, and recreation. But despite the BART love, was it worth building? Could there have been more convenient and cheaper alternatives? And now that we have it, how can we improve the system?

If you ask the critics, many [bus advocates](#) think that BART and CalTrain have cannibalized bus service for lower-income, transit-dependents. Most [transportation academics](#) would have preferred a cheaper system of high-speed buses on separate rights-of-way. And [smart growth advocates](#) would like to see more station area development, which has been stymied in many BART neighborhoods by local activists who don't want more people, traffic, and parking challenges.

I hope BART will address some of these criticisms over the next 40 years by taking three main steps. First, BART should increase service in the urban core (San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley) with more frequent trains to maximize ridership in these densely populated areas. Second, BART should decrease service to outlying areas that don't need expensive heavy-rail trains for suburban commuters. Third, BART should force local governments to lift the development restrictions around the station areas or face reduced service.

BART will probably never make enough money to pay for itself, which is okay given its role as a social service for moving transit dependents and the environmental (and quality of life) benefits it can bring by moving people via electricity rather than oil. But these three changes would improve revenues, reduce costs, increase ridership, and help the Bay Area take better advantage of its now 40-year-old investment.