

# SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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October 24, 2008

**TO:** Commissioners and Alternates

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**SUBJECT: Staff Report on Bicycle, Pedestrian and Wheelchair Access on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge**  
(For Commission consideration on November 6, 2008)

## Summary

Traffic forecasts and bridge operation analyses indicate that traffic conditions on the I-580 corridor could be significantly improved both in the short-term and in the future by changing the lane configuration on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge from four lanes to six lanes. This could be accomplished by converting a roadway shoulder on both bridge decks to a travel lane. One of these roadway shoulders has also been considered for use as a bicycle, pedestrian and wheelchair pathway during non-peak commute hours, preferably with a barrier between traffic lanes and the pathway. Implementing such an option would require a permit from BCDC. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) has determined that using the shoulder for a non-motorized public pathway would pose a safety hazard to motorists and, therefore, Caltrans has concluded that it will not construct a barrier and pathway, even if funding to install them were available.

Caltrans briefed the Commission on this issue at BCDC's April 3, 2008 meeting. At that time, the Commission voted to support non-motorized public access on the bridge and determined that bicycle and pedestrian access would further the goals of: (1) expanding the San Francisco Bay Trail; and (2) providing alternative modes of transportation. At the same time, the Commission requested that within 180 days Caltrans provide: (1) additional details about joint use of the structure for both motorized and non-motorized trips; (2) traffic and safety data;



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and (3) a cost-benefit analysis of providing public access on the bridge and the eastern approach.

In response to the Commission's request, at the November 6, 2008 meeting, Caltrans will provide the following information in a briefing to the Commission:

- A summary of safety issues associated with non-motorized access;
- Accident statistics on comparable facilities with similar physical conditions of non-standard shoulders;
- Potential risks to vehicles, non-motorized users and regional traffic flow;
- Examples of incidents that have occurred or could occur on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge;
- User counts on comparable Bay Area transportation facilities;
- A cost-benefit analysis of providing public access on the bridge based on expected use; and
- Options to the proposed facility.

Because of the public's expressed interest in providing non-motorized public access on the Richmond-San Rafael bridge, the public will be afforded an opportunity to comment, and the Commission may provide further policy guidance on the issue.

### Staff Report

**Background.** The Richmond-San Rafael Bridge opened in September 1956, providing a critical link for motorists between Marin County and Contra Costa County. Up to 77,000 vehicles cross the 4.5-mile bridge daily. The bridge has two decks, each with two 12-foot travel lanes and one 12-foot shoulder, which is reserved for emergencies and maintenance vehicles. Since 1956, direct access for pedestrians and bicycles on the bridge has been prohibited, requiring bicyclists who cross the bridge to board Golden Gate Transit buses or to use a taxi service.

In September 1997, the Commission issued BCDC Permit No. 1-97 to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) for the seismic retrofit of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge between Point San Quentin in San Rafael and Castro Point in Richmond. As a condition of approval, public access benefits were required in the vicinity of the bridge. The Commission did not require bicycle and pedestrian access on the bridge largely because the issues related to motorists and non-motorists sharing the bridge had not been adequately studied. However, Caltrans voluntarily agreed that it would use its best efforts to provide public access across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge by preparing a study in consultation with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) to determine the feasibility of providing such access. Further, if the study determined that some access was feasible, Caltrans agreed to ensure that the access was provided on the bridge as soon as the retrofit work was completed.

**BCDC Support for Bicycle and Pedestrian Access on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.** The Commission has been a long-standing advocate for pedestrian and bicycle access across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and other Bay bridges. The Richmond-San Rafael Bridge is a key component of the regional San Francisco Bay Trail, a project that is envisioned to link all the

counties in the Bay Area and all toll bridges crossing the Bay. BCDC's *San Francisco Bay Plan* supports the efforts of the Bay Trail Project and alternative forms of transportation. For example, the *Bay Plan* policies on public access state that:

"Federal, state, regional, and local jurisdictions, special districts, and the Commission should cooperate to provide appropriately sited, designed and managed public access, especially to link the entire series of shoreline parks, regional trail systems (such as the San Francisco Bay Trail) and existing public access areas to the extent feasible...."

The *Bay Plan* policies on transportation state that:

"Because of the continuing vulnerability of the Bay to filling for transportation projects, the Commission should continue to take an active role in Bay Area regional transportation and related land use planning affecting the Bay, particularly to encourage alternative methods of transportation and land use planning efforts that support transit and that do not require fill."

As part of BCDC Permit No. 1-97, the Commission found that, "[t]here are many laws and policies, including laws and policies which Caltrans operates under, and especially the Commission's laws and policies, which state that bicycle and pedestrian access should be considered in transportation projects and should be provided wherever feasible." The Commission went on to declare that, "[t]he Commission has analyzed the public access issues and found that the provision of bicycle and pedestrian access across the bridge is desirable and would maximize the project's public benefits."

During an October 6, 2006 briefing by MTC staff to the Commission on the topic of public access on the bridge, commissioners further stated that bicycle paths and pedestrian ways are critical for the long-term health and quality of life, that a bicycle and pedestrian facility could offset future traffic demand, and that a moveable barrier seemed to be the most sensible way to accommodate motor vehicles and public access.

**Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Studies.** Much work has been done over the past 11 years to evaluate the feasibility of providing non-motorized public access on the bridge. In an effort to honor its 1997 commitment to study the feasibility of public access on the bridge, Caltrans and others have conducted a number of studies. In 1998, Caltrans concluded that a new cantilevered bicycle/pedestrian facility would be preferable to a buffer-separated, on-deck bicycle and pedestrian facility using the existing bridge shoulder. That study, however, cited deficiencies in available data that precluded definitive safety analyses. To address these deficiencies, Caltrans commissioned the Mineta Transportation Institute to evaluate public access use of freeways, toll bridges and tunnels. In 2001, Caltrans found the Mineta Report to be inconclusive on the issues of capacity, operations, safety and enforcement. In 2002, BCDC requested that Caltrans, MTC and the Bay Area Toll Authority (BATA) prepare an additional study to assess public access on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. As part of that study, MTC and BATA presented a traffic forecasting and bridge operation analysis in November 2005 that showed that traffic conditions on the I-580 corridor could be significantly improved both in the short-term and in the future by changing the bridge from a four-lane to a six-lane configuration. To accomplish this, the shoulders on both the upper and lower deck would have to be converted to travel lanes.

A project study report was finalized in November 2007, aiming to develop feasible, safe and affordable alternatives for bicycle and pedestrian access across the Richmond-San Rafael

Bridge. The project study report identified a preferred public access alternative (Alternative 1B2) consisting of a bi-directional, 10.5-foot-wide multiple-use pathway on the westbound deck of the bridge through the deployment of a movable barrier. Bicycle and pedestrian access would be available at all times except during peak commute hours for westbound traffic. The report concluded with a recommendation that the Project Approval/Environmental Document Phase be initiated. In 2007, MTC identified funds to cover capital improvement costs associated with bicycle, pedestrian and wheelchair access on the bridge. It is not clear whether those funds are still available.

In a March 7, 2008 letter to BATA, the California Department of Transportation stated that “Caltrans is unable to approve the non-standard features associated with Alternative 1B2.” The letter described Caltrans’ safety concerns, which included that freeway facilities without shoulders provide less recovery space for errant vehicles, that incidents involving long vehicles could result in an obstructed traveled way, and that deployment of the moveable barrier would increase accident occurrences. Congestion and emergency response time on the bridge was also stated as a concern. Lastly, the letter contended that the actual cost, including support costs, operations and maintenance for Alternative 1B2 would be \$119.4 million, significantly higher than the \$42.5 million estimate in the 2007 project study report.

On April 3, 2008, Caltrans again briefed the Commission on this issue. At that meeting, the Commission continued its support of pedestrian, bicycle and wheelchair access on the bridge and determined that such public access would further the goals of: (1) expanding the San Francisco Bay Trail; and (2) providing alternative modes of transportation for commuters. At the same time, the Commission requested that within 180 days Caltrans provide: (1) additional details about joint use of the structure for both motorized and non-motorized trips; (2) traffic and safety data; and (3) a cost-benefit analysis of providing public access on the bridge and the eastern approach.

**BCDC Permit Authority.** The McAteer-Petris Act and the *San Francisco Bay Plan* both state that maximum feasible public access, consistent with the project, should be provided in and through every new development in the Bay or on the shoreline. Converting a roadway shoulder to a travel lane and/or a bicycle and pedestrian pathway would require a BCDC permit because such a project would constitute a significant change in use, as described by Regulation Section 10125(b)(3), which states that a change in use includes a substantial change in the intensity of use.

