

# Ames provides reasoned voice on BART board

BART is a transit system hanging by a financial thread.

Thanks to federal pandemic aid, the Bay Area's largest commuter rail service can balance its budget for about three more years, according to district projections. But after the 2024-25 fiscal year, after the federal bailout money runs out, the district is staring at shortfalls starting at \$118 million per year.

"We're heading toward a fiscal cliff," says Director Liz Ames, who represents Southern Alameda County on the BART Board of Directors. "I'm very concerned."

Ames and Director Debora Allen from Contra Costa County have been warning of the financial danger ahead as the district returns to full service and the board majority hands out salary increases with little regard to the budgetary crisis ahead.

Ames is also the only one of the nine directors who is up for election this year and faces a challenger. Voters should reelect her to the District 6 seat — representing Fremont, Union City, Newark and south Hayward — in the Nov. 8 elections. Riders and taxpayers need her voice of reason.

With more people working from home, with San Francisco experiencing the worst commuter workforce recovery of any large city in North America, BART ridership is about one-third of what it was before the pandemic and is not projected to fully recover during the next 10 years.

This is a time, more than ever, where BART officials need to rethink spending that for decades has been driven by the labor unions. And it's a time when the system badly needs independent fiscal oversight — especially given BART's troubled history of broken promises to voters, excessive salary and benefit costs and inappropriate use of taxpayer money for campaigns.

Top management and a majority of BART directors have resisted outside oversight and have spent the past three years trying to undermine the district's highly qualified inspector

general. Despite a voter mandate for the independent office, BART leaders want to continue doing it their way, with no one looking over their shoulders.

Only three BART directors — Ames, Allen and John McPartland — recognize the need for truly independent oversight. For example, they have objected while other board members have backed the unions' attempts to require the inspector general to notify labor unions every time she intends to interview an employee.

Such a ridiculous requirement would be anathema to the notion of independent oversight and the ability of whistleblowers to come forward anonymously. Yet it is supported by Ames' leading opponent in the upcoming election, Lance Nishihira, a software designer and New Haven Unified School District trustee.

Ames, a civil engineer elected to her first term four years ago, warned even before the pandemic about BART's ridership decline. Since COVID-19 struck, she has been flagging the 2025 funding crisis ahead and has understandable concern that it might come sooner and be worse than district administrators forecast. She notes that the district has been overly optimistic during the pandemic about ridership recovery — a critical component of the budget forecasts.

In sharp contrast, Nishihira said he didn't know when the federal money was scheduled to run out and hadn't studied the budget. "Understanding how budgets work like this is probably going to take at least a year," he said. "I look forward to learning more about how this budget works." This is no time for learning on the job.

The third candidate in the race, real estate investor and developer Shyam Chetal, ran unsuccessfully for the BART board in 1998, finishing last in a four-candidate race, and for Fremont City Council in 2002, finishing eighth in a nine-candidate race.

And, like Nishihira, he is similarly in the dark about the details of BART's financial challenges and budget. "I have not looked at it," he said. "How can I look at the budget for BART? I don't work for them." Um, the budget is public information that's easily found online and should be one of the first stops for any candidate running for public office.

BART needs directors who understand the district's finances and are prepared to address the fiscal challenges ahead. In the District 6 race, Ames is the only candidate who meets those criteria.