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# BART, AC Transit elections to decide key leaders navigating post-COVID ridership, fiscal crisis

Nine candidates are vying for four board seats



SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA – APRIL 1: A bicyclist prepares to board a BART train at the Embarcadero station in San Francisco, Calif., on Friday, April 1, 2022. California state Sen. Josh Becker from District 13 introduced the Seamless Transit Transformation Act to the California legislature in the hopes of a more seamless and affordable rider experience among two dozen transit agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area. The legislation would also require the formation of a

“standardized regional transit mapping and wayfinding system,” across the 27 transit agencies in the Bay Area. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

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East Bay residents will be electing important BART and AC Transit board members this November as candidates vie for the responsibility of steering two of the Bay Area’s largest transit agencies through a ridership collapse and looming fiscal crisis.

With topics spanning the future of bus and rail service in the Bay Area, fiscal responsibility, and public health concerns, the coming years will see the Bay Area’s transit leaders tackle one of the [most trying times for public transit in the region](#).

The elections for BART’s District 6 and three competitive AC Transit board seats are also a rare opportunity for transit riders and taxpayers to influence the workings of transportation agencies, which oversee billions of dollars in public funds. There are only [three](#) transit agencies in the country with directly elected board members and two of them are here in the Bay Area.

Here is a rundown of the elections:

### **BART District 6: Liz Ames vs. Lance Nishihira**

In BART District 6, including Fremont, Union City, and South Hayward, Liz Ames, a [longtime civil engineer](#), is battling for her seat against Lance Nishihira, a software engineer. The race has exposed deep divisions at BART, with the agency’s largest union and five directors [endorsing Nishihira](#). Ames earned the support of fiscally conservative directors Deborah Allen and John McPartland along with the BART police union.



Ames, a one-term incumbent, has pitched herself as a fiscally savvy leader who has been calling on BART to tighten its belt as the agency relies on federal relief dollars to keep the trains running. This [one-time federal money](#) is expected to run out around 2026 and BART will face the tough task of finding a new combination of taxpayer subsidies and cuts to shore up the budget.



BART Board Director Liz Ames

While Ames largely votes in tandem with the BART majority, she often sided with the minority on contentious issues. Ames has voted against pay raises at BART citing fiscal concerns and backed the agency's [inspector general](#), who unsuccessfully sought more authority to investigate fraud, waste, and abuse.

"We spent hundreds of millions on empty trains for a whole year during COVID," Ames said, adding that BART needs to pivot away from its current ticketing structure and offer monthly passes. "We need to come up with a new revenue model."

Nishihira, a New Haven Unified School District trustee, said BART should be looking to improve the train riding experience and reduce the cost to ride transit. He said the answer to the agency's fiscal woes will come through new taxpayer funding.

"We were going to have to get comfortable with the fact that we're going to have to seek alternative funding sources," Nishihira said.

A third candidate Shyam Chetal, a real estate investor, is also running in the race. Chetal, who has not published a campaign website or done any campaign outreach said BART should offer \$2 fares during off-peak hours. "I know I can do it," he said. "I know more than the general manager."

### **AC Transit: At-large, Ward 3, and Ward 4 elections**

The East Bay's biggest bus operator spanning nearly all of Alameda and Contra Costa counties is eyeing major transformations in the coming years. The agency is embarking on a service restructuring this year that could spell the end of its poorly performing transbay buses and virtually abandon transit service to San Francisco's \$2.2 billion Salesforce Transit Center.





BART board candidate Lance Nishihira

The three competitive seats all have one common theme for voters: Do they want a newcomer to revamp agency policy or an experienced hand guiding AC Transit through financially tough times?

The at-large seat includes 13 cities in the AC Transit district. This election is seeing major Democratic organizations and Bay Area transit advocates line up behind [Alfred](#)

[Twu](#), a Berkeley-based architect, who said AC Transit needs to better prioritize rider experience, including improved connections with BART.

Twu said AC Transit leadership was part of the reason [legislation](#) that would have mandated better coordination among the Bay Area's fragmented system of transit agencies did not succeed in the state legislature.

"The status quo pre-2020 was that transit existed to relieve rush hour traffic," said Twu. "The new vision for transit really focuses on not just rush hour, but everything you need to do."

[Joel Young](#), an attorney, who has served on the board for 13 years, is backed by the AC Transit's bus operator union. He said voters should look to his record of pushing for more funding for clean-air buses and better service.



AC Transit board candidate Alfred Twu

"What

people have to think about is during these times, do you want someone who has a significant amount of experience dealing with the agency, or do you want someone brand new?" Young said.



Joel Young, AC Transit director. (Courtesy of Joel Young)



Up next is [Sarah Syed](#), a longtime transportation planner who has worked at LA Metro, BART, and VTA. She is facing [Stewart Chen](#), president of Oakland Chinatown Improvement Council for Ward 3, which includes Alameda and San Leandro.

“I read transit budgets for a living,” said Syed. She said the agency will need to “reckon with the realities of who kept driving transit during the pandemic” and prioritize racial justice in the agency’s service restructuring. Chen has focused his campaign on making riders feel safer on buses and expanding Asian-American representation on the board.



Sarah Syed, AC Transit board candidate.

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“What can I do so riders can feel safe again while waiting at the bus stop?” Chen said.



Lastly, incumbent [Murphy McCalley](#) is competing against [Barisha Spriggs](#). McCalley, who has years of work experience in transit finance, is running for his first full term after being appointed to fill a board vacancy in May. Spriggs, a former labor union organizer and substitute teacher, did not immediately return interview requests.

McCalley said AC Transit will have to seek more outside funding from the state. But he did not shy away from possible budget cuts in the future.

“At the end of the day . . . if you got to cut service, you got to cut some service,” he said. “But that’s clearly not where you start.”



AC Transit Board Director  
Murphy McCalley

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AC Transit Board candidate  
Barisha Spriggs

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## Eliyahu Kamisher

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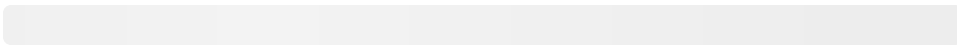
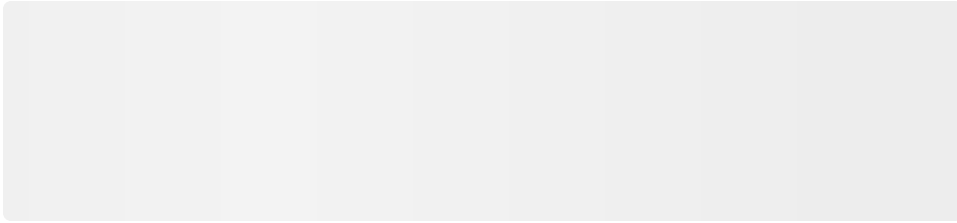
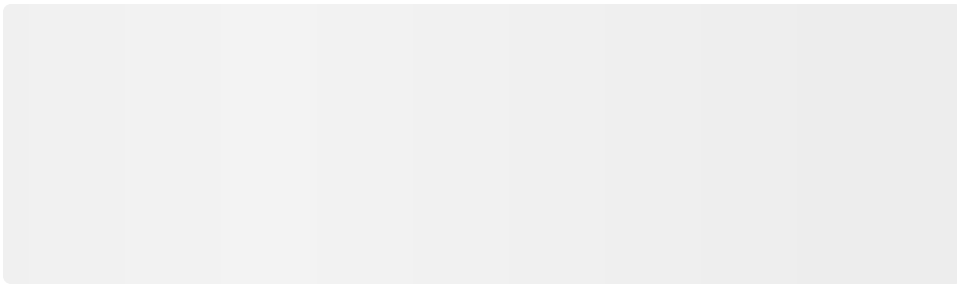
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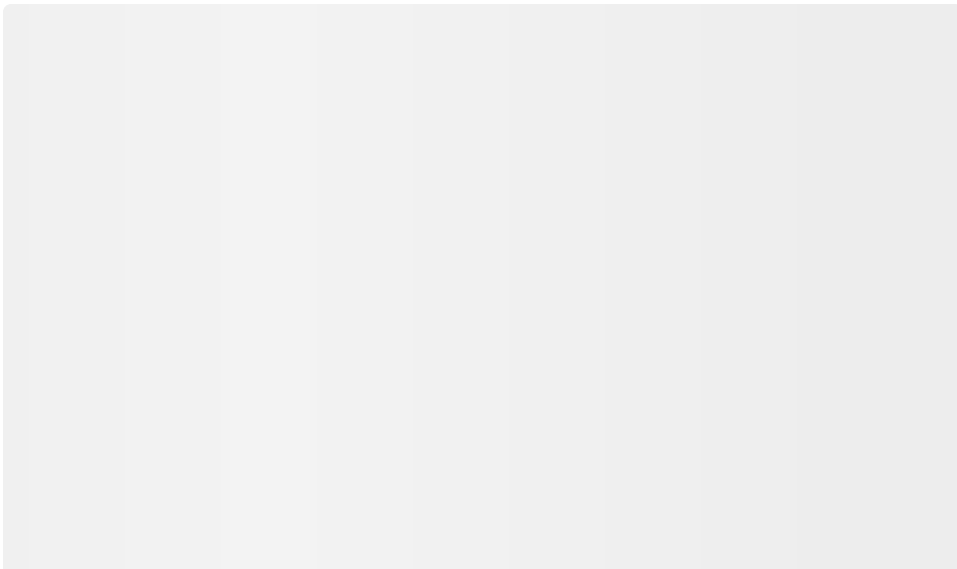




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