

Opinion: BART ridership declining because of crime and violence

Liz Ames

I want to commend the heroic acts of BART passengers and community members that led to the Hayward and BART Police Department's arrest of a suspect in last month's fatal assault of a BART passenger at the South Hayward station.

But we must ask the question: Why is this happening?

BART ridership continues to decline amid chronic lawlessness and reports of violence on trains and in the stations.

Recent Contra Costa and Alameda County grand jury reports called for BART to provide a visible public safety presence. But BART police are stretched thin due to high turnover and a lack of commitment to expand the size of the department by previous boards of directors.

Meanwhile, media reports regularly feature stories of dissatisfied and concerned BART riders. Indeed, the recent attack in South Hayward was just the latest in a series of high-profile violent crimes in the system. Clearly, BART is not doing enough to curtail lawless conduct and to ensure the safety, comfort and security of passengers.

Though we continue to move more than 400,000 passengers daily, today BART ridership is down to 2013 levels. Riders endure ripped seats, trash, drug use and homeless people sleeping in stations and on trains. Most of our stations are not adequately cleaned — only the downtown San Francisco stations are regularly steam cleaned. The result is a dreadful and discouraging daily rider experience.

As BART director representing southern Alameda County, I place the highest priority on public safety. But it is obvious that far more needs to be done. We need to refocus BART on maintaining and growing ridership by building community trust, and assuring passengers the system is safe, secure and reliable.

Let's begin by rolling out a plan to secure BART by installing new fare gates and raising railings to 6 feet at all stations within two years. Move elevators to within the paid areas to prevent riders at the Bay Fair and Coliseum stations from entering the BART system without paying fares. And eliminate panhandling on trains and platforms.

The recovery of lost fare revenue, estimated at \$25 million a year, will help fund these improvements and deter crime on our trains and at our stations. BART administrators must find a way to immediately allocate the needed resources and make station "hardening" the highest priority.

In my first year as a BART director, I cast the lone vote against the \$2.3 billion BART budget for 2019. Why? Because I wanted more funds dedicated to public safety — by hiring more BART police officers and by providing clean, safe stations and trains. The budget included fare increases, but I could not in good conscience approve an increase in BART fares without a firm commitment to improving the overall ridership experience.

I still believe that we cannot fix the problem of lost ridership by increasing fares. I will not vote to approve the 2020 BART budget unless it includes a multi-year plan for significant improvements to public safety, security and cleanliness — at all the stations, including those in suburban districts.

The time for public safety action is now, and I urge you to join me and others as we work to reverse the unnecessary and ongoing decline of our BART system.

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