

OPINION

Opinion: New BART housing law makes elections much more critical

It is more important than ever that we elect directors who are independent from special interests



(Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

The Union City BART station and surrounding housing is seen from this drone view.

By **DEBORA ALLEN** |

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AB2923 puts local government on notice that when it comes to control of development of BART property there is a new sheriff in town: The BART Board of Directors.



BART Director Debora Allen (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group)

The law removes control from local elected leaders and fast-tracks housing development on BART-owned land at the transit agency's own discretion. Cities no longer having authority over things like building height, density, parking replacement and low-income housing ratios.

Given the new control handed the regionally elected nine-member BART board, it is more important than ever that we elect directors who can demonstrate their independence from special interests.

BART directors now and in the future must be capable of making decisions that consider the specific economic needs of each community, without the undue influence of urban planners, land-use consultants, developers, builders, architects, engineers and unions.

While some have labeled the law a power-grab on the part of the BART directors, not every director supported the bill. I and two of my colleagues, Directors John McPartland and Thomas Blalock, opposed the proposal outright.



Those of us opposed to AB2923 fully support transit-oriented development to ease the region's housing crunch and cut down on commuting times. In fact, BART has worked cooperatively with city councils and local developers to build more than 3,800 apartments and town homes at 13 of its stations, and 2,000 have already been built.

Transit villages underway at Fruitvale, Walnut Creek and Lake Merritt stations are testament to how the system should work — funded by private developers and overseen by local elected leaders who understand the needs of their communities and have the most at stake. BART shouldn't be able to override how local communities are developed.

AB2923 will surely break the cooperative relationship between BART and local elected leaders as the transit agency becomes judge and jury over housing development around its stations. Already packed parking lots around stations will be eliminated, with BART making decisions on whether the parking is replaced. This will force more commuters back onto the freeways.

The law might serve as an impediment to future BART expansion in other suburban areas. No community in its right mind would willingly turn over local control of housing to an outside transit agency.

The law also sets a dangerous precedent for other transit agencies and other types of special districts once they realize that housing is more lucrative than their stated missions. Suddenly, mission creep will become a good thing. With AB2923 leading the way, once-singularly focused agencies will seek the same kind of control over planning and development on the vast swaths of land they own.

Those who already feared the flow of special interest money into BART elections now have cause for greater concern as outside interests try to influence directors suddenly given new power. This November, there are four career urban planners or land-use consultants running for BART director, one in each of the four districts on the ballot.

It will be up to voters to ensure that the directors they elect can handle the responsibilities that come with this newly acquired power without special interest influence. It's an important decision.



Perhaps that last race on the last page of your ballot, titled BART Director, should

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**Debora Allen**

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