

Union City's controversial road project moves forward, but public transit funds safe, for now

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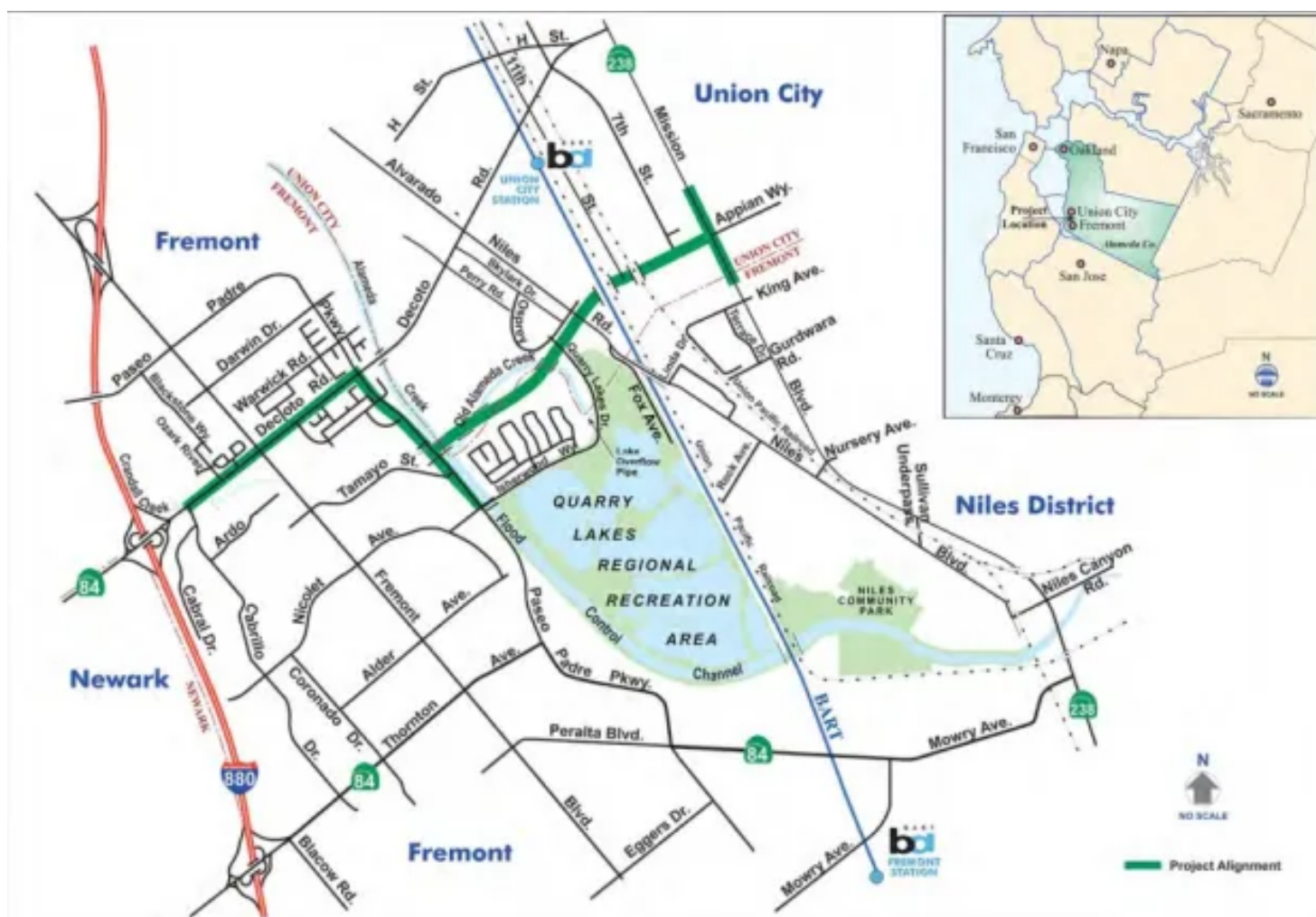
OAKLAND — A [controversial plan](#) to divert \$75 million in dedicated public transit funds for a new and wider road in Union City is on hold until designs for the new thoroughfare are complete.

The Alameda County Transportation Commission voted Thursday at its meeting in Oakland to fund the completion of designs for the project, which is expected to cost \$320 million, and to [transfer the project](#) to Union City. Designs for the 3-mile roadway are only 65 percent complete, and costs could change once the designs are closer to being finalized, said Union City Mayor Carol Dutra-Vernaci.

“The decision ... is to defer until we get a more accurate reflection of the dollar amounts,” she said. “We realize there are several risks involved, along with the high price tag.”

The project comes at a time when the city is contemplating declaring a [fiscal emergency](#) and is asking residents to raise their taxes to cover basic services. Transferring the project to Union City also puts the town on the hook for cost overruns, a [likely prospect](#) given the [complexity of the project](#), which would create a new road between Paseo Padre Parkway and Mission Boulevard and would widen parts of Paseo Padre and Decoto Road to six lanes.

Along the way, the new road would cross under three sets of railroad tracks, pass through a superfund site where heavy metals have a high risk of leaching into the drinking water supply, require construction of three new bridges over Alameda Creek and the Alameda County Flood Control Channel, and force the demolition of the Ramirez Farm, a pesticide-free vegetable farm with a roadside stand.



The proposed new roadway would connect Mission Boulevard in Union City to Interstate 880 in Fremont. (Courtesy Alameda CTA)

City officials say the new roadway is necessary for the Union City BART station to thrive, which is now seeing an influx of new development with [1,700 apartment units](#) recently constructed or planned within walking distance of the station and more plans to add [1.2 million square feet of office space](#).

But, bicycling, pedestrian and transit advocates [balked](#) at the city's proposal to use \$210 million in Measure BB funds, a half-cent sales tax voters approved in 2014, to fill gaps in the project's funding. Of that, \$75 million would come from a fund earmarked for

the future [Union City Intermodal Station](#), where the BART station is now, that would one-day connect passengers to Capitol Corridor, ACE trains and a future railroad that would traverse the Dumbarton rail bridge.

Dave Campbell, the director of advocacy and policy at Bike East Bay, called it a “sad day” for the commission.

“Today is a very sad day at the Alameda (County Transportation Commission) that in the year 2018 we’re having discussions about how to recklessly spend \$210 million in additional dollars and taking them from transit and walking and biking for a roadway project, a relic freeway project,” he said. “We’re breaching the voter trust by simply asking for it.”

In order to use the \$75 million dedicated to the intermodal station, the commission would have to [approve an amendment](#) to the Measure BB expenditure plan, a lengthy public process that recognizes the money is being used in a different way than what was presented to voters, said Tess Lengyel, the commission’s deputy executive director of planning and policy.

As bicycling, pedestrian and transit advocates prepare to drum up support for [Regional Measure 3](#), a \$3 toll bridge increase coming to voters in June for transit, highway, bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure, it’s imperative voters know their money will be spent the way its being presented to them, said Edie Irons, the communications director for TransForm, a transportation advocacy nonprofit.

“We, the voters, need confidence that commitments to projects, or at least the general uses of voter-approved funds, will be respected after the spotlight of an election passes,” she said. “It’s very troubling those commitments can be so dramatically revised after the fact.”

The only money allocated at Thursday’s meeting was \$2.5 million to complete designs for the roadway. The commission also agreed to perform a new traffic analysis and investigate whether it’s necessary to perform more environmental clearance work, which come with an additional unspecified cost. Money for the designs and additional study are coming from Measure B, a sales tax measure Alameda County voters approved in 1986 that allocated \$89 million to the road project.

And, in an unexpected boon to transit advocates, the commission also approved funding to study the feasibility of creating a new set of rail tracks along the same corridor that one day may be used to [carry trains over the Dumbarton rail bridge](#).