

Peninsula needs federal funding for rail safety



By Emily Beach and Ellen Kamei

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Burlingame 11/20/20 @ 4:48 PM:
“Caltrain struck multiple vehicles at Broadway ... allegedly occupied with approximately 6 people ... no reported injuries.”



Emily Beach



Ellen Kamei

Another near miss at Broadway.

It’s a harrowing crossing. Each day, 70,000 vehicles squeeze into six crowded lanes, jockeying to beat traffic lights and safety gates while cyclists, pedestrians, workforce, high school students and San Francisco International Airport travelers converge from five different directions. Since 2017, Burlingame’s Broadway has earned the infamous distinction as the California Public Utility Commission’s number one priority railroad crossing in the state to fix. Six other Caltrain crossings rank among the CPUC’s worst 20, including two in Mountain View. These railroad-roadway intersections invite collisions, create unpredictable delays, increase emergency response times and degrade overall Caltrain performance.

Grade separation projects solve these problems by separating the railroad tracks from the road. Yet constructing them on our 150-year-old active urban railroad is a complex and expensive undertaking. High construction costs and land values lead to price tags of \$200 million to \$400 million for each project, requiring an urgent need for federal and private sector dollars.

Caltrain is key to our sustainable future, and Peninsula cities are wisely anchoring growth and density around our stations. Pre-pandemic, 92 daily commuter trains carried 65,000 people along the Peninsula — representing more than a million miles not driven in automobiles each day. By 2030, we expect 128 additional trains (totaling 220) traveling through our cities — and Caltrain envisions tripling ridership by 2040. Without grade separation, delays caused by gate downtimes will increase from approximately 65 minutes today up to 400 minutes by 2040, exacerbating gridlock on Highway 101 and our local streets. Productivity and air quality will suffer, while tempers rage.

Grade separations in greater Silicon Valley strengthen local communities, the entire Caltrain system, and protect the economic engine of California — a state that generates more federal tax revenue than we receive. Like all cities with Caltrain service, Mountain View and Burlingame are working to balance commercial growth and new housing at all affordability levels around our stations. People need safe connections to work, residences, transit, parks, schools and community centers. Envisioned for Rengstorff Avenue in Mountain View is a bicycle and pedestrian bridge, wider ADA compliant sidewalks and protected bikeways that improve livability for low-income households located near the tracks. Within half a mile of Broadway, hotels and offices complement nearly 500 new housing units under construction. The new station will also fix an acute bottleneck problem that requires passing trains to halt while others unload, improving systemwide Caltrain performance for all riders.

Historically, local tax dollars primarily funded grade separations. Since 1988, our counties have contributed \$306 million (54% of the total cost) to construct eight grade separation projects, plus an additional \$63 million for eight projects currently under design. However, costs increase over time. Planners estimate \$2.5 billion to \$3 billion is needed to construct seven priority grade separation projects in Burlingame, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Redwood City, San Bruno, South San Francisco and Sunnyvale. Together we potentially face a \$2 billion funding shortfall, despite generating \$1 billion in local county grade separation funds over the next 30 years. To address safety at all 41 at-grade crossings along its corridor, Caltrain estimates a sobering figure of \$10 billion is needed.

Grade separations provide extraordinary benefits, but cities cannot fund them alone. Shockingly, the U.S. FAST Act only dedicates about \$260 million nationwide annually for rail safety improvements. Although a bipartisan Senate bill currently proposes a \$500 million increase, Caltrain has requested the federal government allocate \$1 billion nationwide annually.

We're fortunate to have many Caltrain champions among our Bay Area congressional delegation, but our crusade requires broad national support.

We urge the federal government to recognize the importance of investing in the safety and livability of local connector cities like ours, plus visionary regional hubs like San Francisco's Downtown Extension and San Jose's Diridon Station. Our best hope to channel big federal dollars into the Bay Area is to think ahead and work together. By advocating in partnership and embracing regional collaboration we can achieve our vision for a more sustainable future.

Burlingame Councilmember Emily Beach is chair of San Mateo County Transportation Authority. Mountain View Mayor Ellen Kamei serves on Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's Policy Advisory Committee.

