

## **How a More Inclusive Ferry System Emerged from the Ashes of the Pandemic**

From the erosion of jobs in sectors like hospitality and construction to the sudden need for parents to look after children that typically would be in school during the day, the rippling effects of the pandemic largely widened the gap in wealth inequality across the U.S. To make matters worse, social distancing regulations decimated the ability for public transportation systems to operate as usual, which only further hurt the lower-income communities that historically rely on them in urban areas.

Forced to downsize significantly if not shut down altogether, public transit agencies had to turn to relying on government funds to finance their reorganization and recoveries. The diesel-powered ferries that traverse the San Francisco Bay were no exception to this, and with California's ambitious emission reduction goals posing an additional financial hurdle on the horizon, concerns were raised over the system's potential to make a comeback.

But despite these challenges coming from multiple directions, the Water Emergency Transportation Authority - the regional public transit agency that manages the vast majority of the ferry service on the San Francisco Bay - took the opportunity to reimagine an approach that's not only allowed the ferries to outpace the other Bay Area modes of public transportation in post-pandemic ridership recovery, but has actually fostered economic growth among the region's lower-income communities.

During the early stages of the pandemic, when the ferries were closed down, WETA applied and competed for a series of grants to further supplement the federal COVID-19 relief funds they

received. This allowed them to pursue their Pandemic Recovery Plan, which featured expanding on the different areas they serviced, adding additional routes on weekends, and slashing fare rates by 30% in order to better match the costs of taking the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) or one of the Transbay bussing services.

By August of 2022, WETA was outperforming BART's ridership recovery by a margin of nearly 2:1. And within this recovery, WETA observed a shift in the demographics of the post-pandemic riders.

"We've seen that the percentage of riders that come from lower incomes has doubled since we made this change," said Seamus Murphy, WETA's Executive Director.

The ferries' decision to slash fare rates hasn't just helped make commuting across the bay more inclusive, it's created an avenue for Bay Area residents to reach opportunities for economic growth, for people's own households as well as the rest of the region.

"Most of the region's development is happening on the waterfront, and a lot of those waterfronts are transit graveyards: they're not accessible by the traditional transit modes that exist in the area," Murphy said. "Without our system, people from lower-income communities wouldn't have access to the jobs that are being created in Mission Bay or on Treasure Island or the Alameda basin."

Residents from lower-income communities, however, weren't the only new riders after the pandemic. According to Murphy, many of the people that have started using the ferry after the pandemic come from higher income brackets as well. So while ridership hasn't yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, reaching 80% as of December 2022, the distribution of varying income levels appears to me much more diverse than it was before these changes.

Aside from the now comparable rates, many people attribute their choice to take the ferry to the boats being considerably more quiet, clean, and safe than BART, as well as the overall beauty and relaxation of the ride.

"I have buddies that are electricians that ride the ferries and I have buddies that work for Google and Facebook and other tech companies that ride the ferry everyday," said Kyle Jensen, a captain for San Francisco Bay Ferry. "It's really everybody."

This scene Jensen depicts can be witnessed upon the first step onto one of the San Francisco Bay ferries during regular commuter times.

Despite being crowded, the cabins are virtually silent aside from the drone of the boat's machinery, whispered conversations between friends and coworkers riding together, and the occasional deckhand greeting a familiar face.

Some of these faces have their noses in their phones, others are eating or typing away on a laptop, and some are just closing their eyes to enjoy a few minutes of rest. Some are wearing

slacks and dress shoes and even full tuxedos, while some are in jeans and work boots or bundled up in layers of sweatpants and sweatshirts.

These men and women ranging dramatically in age and background are all going in different directions, both in life as well as geographically. But for a few moments at the start and end of their days, they come together to enjoy an experience that Bay Area residents have revered for over a hundred years.

“You really get a flavor of the community when you choose to take the ferry to work,” said Anton Delwing, an Alameda resident that takes the ferry to and from San Francisco day after day.