

As foot traffic increased at Sunday's Head West Markt in downtown San Francisco, three pedicab drivers sat on the east side of the Ferry Building to wait for their next rides. The trio noted that the day was perfect for pedicab drivers because the Giants were playing the Baltimore Orioles at Oracle Park just a few blocks away.

The drivers said they couldn't disclose their names or go on the record for tax purposes. One of the men then lit a cigarette and made a quip about the IRS and its income reporting methods for independent contractors like pedicab drivers.

The bikers' conversation was eventually broken up by the roar of ferries rolling into the pier. The boats unleashed passengers upon the docks, giving the pedicab drivers new riders to shuttle into the city.

Weekend tourist traffic has become a revenue pillar for both pedicab drivers and the Water Emergency Transport Authority's ferries over the last three years. WETA's information and media director, Thomas Hall, said tourists are usually more active than the Bay Area's native commuters on Saturdays and Sundays.

"Before the pandemic, year-round, we'd carry a lot of commuters every day," Hall said. "Then, it would get busier during the summers because you'd have folks from outside the region ... That recreational market has taken on new importance because it's a higher proportion of our ridership than it was pre-pandemic just because the commuters have lacked in that market."

Hall pointed out that ferries lost 92% of their riders when shelter-in-place orders were issued in March 2020 because of COVID-19. WETA did not, however, cease its ferry service or lay off its maritime staff during the pandemic.

Select routes continued to operate to transport essential workers. Among those that never stopped commuting to the city during the pandemic is Antonio Holden — an operations manager for a local pension and insurance business.

“It was like a ghost town at that time, especially during the first few months,” said Holden, who commutes from Vallejo. “Like, I think there was one day I was the only person sitting up here for the morning trip in.”

Hall said weekend ferry ridership has returned to about 100% of what it was before the pandemic. He added that, as of this summer, roughly 70% of WETA’s regular pre-pandemic commuters have returned.

Holden, who uses an electric scooter to get to and from his boat each day, hasn’t seen ferry ridership increase as much as WETA claims it has.

“The boats are a lot less crowded than they used to be,” Holden said. “If you look at the ferries’ websites, they’ll tell you their ridership numbers are up. They say they have more unique riders now than they did before the pandemic, but when I was first taking the boat, this boat would be packed.

“You see how everybody has an open seat next to them now? It wasn’t always that way. I used to be rolling up to the boat a few minutes before it left, and I’d always have to sit in a middle seat.”

Hall said hybrid work schedules have kept regular commuters from using the ferries five days a week. His data indicates many people only take the ferry three days a week now.

Greg Hylton is one of the Bay Area's many three-day commuters — though he isn't necessarily thrilled to have the moniker. For over 30 years, Hylton commuted to San Francisco from his Marin County home daily using Golden Gate Ferry's Larkspur route.

Now, he feels like a walking endorsement of the hybrid work schedule that is killing his business. Hylton is a commercial realtor, and his salary is 100% commission-based. He receives few insurance benefits from his company, which means he pays for his healthcare and retirement plan with the money he makes selling office spaces.

Hylton said the need for offices has fallen dramatically since 2020 because more people are working remotely. Most of his work now comes from companies looking to downsize.

"I've seen every downturn since the beginning of time, I think," Hylton said. "... You get used to the waves, but it's not an easy business. I told my three children that, if they went into commercial real estate, I'd shoot them. It's been good for a while, but I don't know how it's going to be in the future. The whole work dynamic has changed. I don't know where it's going. I usually know it's going to come back. This time, I don't know if it's going to come back."

With fewer workers making daily office commutes, Hall said WETA has begun to think of new ways to make money. The organization has added more routes and decreased fares to make riding the ferry more attractive.

WETA is also hoping to provide Californians with a cleaner mode of transportation. The Authority hopes at least half of its boats will run on electricity, hydrogen fuel cells, or other zero-emission technologies by 2035.

State grants have helped WETA push toward its goal. In March, WETA unveiled a prototype hydrogen fuel cell-powered vessel developed by Switch Maritime called the Sea Change. The 50-passenger boat has not been used on regular commuter routes yet.

Even if WETA doesn't accomplish its clean energy objectives or increase daily ridership, ferries are unlikely to completely disappear from the Bay Area. Hall said, in the event of an earthquake, ferries provide transport when bridges and subways might otherwise be impassable.

"Really, a high watermark in terms of the necessity of ferry service is emergency response," Hall said. "When you can't get across the bay otherwise, you need something to move first responders and evacuees. If we're going to prepare for the big one and have that service available, we might as well run that ferry service between earthquakes.

"What we do here is offer daily ferry service while staying ready for the times when we need emergency services. It's an important part of the Bay Area transit ecosystem."