

Low BART ridership, high office vacancy rates suggest San Francisco isn't fully back

Jim Patrick reclined in his desk chair, his round glasses resting on his nose and a blue pen clipped to his collared shirt's pocket, as he recalled boarding up his store's windows amid the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patrick's family has owned Patrick & Co., an office supplies store in downtown San Francisco, since 1873. The store's locations on Market Street and Mission Street saw roughly five to 10 customers per day during the height of COVID-19.

A good day included \$20 in sales. Anything more was considered great.

But Patrick, now 84 and in his 50th year of ownership, refused to close shop. He paid expenses out of his own pocket, which included employee salaries, as he hoped for a swift recovery.

While that recovery has been anything but quick, Patrick said a return to pre-pandemic numbers is possible. But he believes the process is still years away because of San Francisco's diminished downtown foot traffic.

"You can't have a business without any people," Patrick said. "Once people are working here, they'll buy from us. But if they don't come to work, they won't buy from us."

Mayor Daniel Lurie has cited cleaner streets, a decreasing crime rate and a busier downtown as reasons for optimism in San Francisco's recovery. But key indicators of thriving downtown activity, such as foot traffic, retail sales and Bay Area Rapid Transit ridership, are far from

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pre-pandemic figures, which has left some business owners questioning whether the city has fully rebounded.

Patrick praised Lurie's efforts to improve public safety and create cleaner streets. But he believes a better indicator of the city's downtown recovery is office vacancies, which have led to a decrease in foot traffic and BART ridership.

The numbers support his assertion.

Remote work slows downtown recovery

The San Francisco County Transportation Authority's [2025 study](#) found that downtown travel "dropped significantly in the post-pandemic era," citing increases in remote work as a primary cause.

Only [7.2%](#) of San Francisco workers primarily worked from home in 2019, according to a Coworking Magazine study. That figure increased to 35.1% in 2021 and remained above 20% in 2023. Low transit numbers and high office vacancy rates in 2026 suggest the number hasn't fully recovered.

Office vacancy rates reached [30.4%](#) in 2026, a [195% increase](#) from 2020. With nearly a third of San Francisco's offices empty due to increased remote work, BART ridership is half of its 2019 total, which has reduced downtown foot traffic.

For stores like Patrick & Co., fewer office workers mean less need for office supplies. Patrick said he tracks BART numbers daily as an indicator of his store's traffic.

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“It used to be you had to dodge traffic, you had to maneuver around people just to walk between our stores,” Patrick said. “Did you have that problem today? No. There’s your answer.”

Hans Hansson, the president of Starboard Commercial Real Estate in San Francisco, said office vacancy rates remain high because, while AI companies are leasing office spaces at greater frequencies, they’re doing so in small quantities.

“The AI market is booming right now. But it tends to be smaller deals under 5,000 square feet, and they have not jumped to the next level to lease substantial square footage,” Hansson said. “It’s not enough yet to make an impact, which is why vacancies are still high.”

Paul Picciani, a senior vice president at Kidder Mathews’ San Francisco branch, said AI companies such as OpenAI and Anthropic are increasingly leasing office space in San Francisco.

Picciani praised the city’s recovery but remained wary of a full return to pre-pandemic statistics.

“It’s coming back. But I don’t think we’re ever going to get back to where it was pre-COVID, where people came into the office five days a week,” Picciani said.

Lucila Galván, who has run Patrick & Co’s Mission Street location for 22 years, said downtown foot traffic is about 60% of its 2019 figure.

The 55-year-old said the rise in remote work was sparked by “aggressive” lockdown measures in San Francisco in 2020 and has led to a decrease in the store’s customers.

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“BART was full in the mornings and afternoons before the pandemic. Now it’s half empty,” Galván said. “And the foot traffic still hasn’t recovered.”

The 2019 pre-pandemic average of 410,774 weekday BART riders [decreased nearly 56%](#) to 182,487 in January 2026. Its busiest day, Jan. 28, produced just 207,343 paid exits across its 50 exit stations.

Patrick said San Francisco’s retail sales still haven’t recovered to their pre-pandemic peak of [\\$20.89 billion](#) because fewer BART riders mean fewer people outside his stores.

“We depend on the BART traffic. I track the BART traffic, and you see it’s improving,” Patrick said. “It went down and slowly raised, but it still isn’t back to where it was or should be.”

Lurie highlights improvements

In his [State of the City address on Jan. 15](#), Lurie cited the city’s decreasing crime rate, [down 25%](#) from the previous year, and his fight for affordability as reasons San Francisco is “a city on the rise.”

“For the first time in five years, San Franciscans believe we are moving in the right direction,” Lurie said. “... People are proud to live here again. You can feel it. There’s never been a more exciting time to be a San Franciscan.”

Patrick said his store’s revenue is creeping toward pre-pandemic numbers. And he believes Lurie’s efforts have drastically helped small businesses recover.

But he doesn’t buy Lurie’s claim that San Francisco is back — not yet, at least.

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“I think [Lurie] has done an excellent job in trying to build traffic downtown, so I certainly give him credit for that,” Patrick said. “It’s coming back, but it’s not there yet.”