

**[Marina Bay at standstill over trains](#)**

- [C.W. Nevius](#)

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Marina Bay is a neighborhood held hostage by the train.

The Richmond subdivision is a thriving, growing collection of homes, businesses and shops overlooking San Francisco Bay. What was once the sprawling Kaiser Shipyard is now a tidy, trendy, upscale development -- a perfect model for urban renewal.

Except for that damn train.

The facts are pretty simple. Bounded by the bay at the far end and dead ends at the edges, there are only three streets that will get you into or out of Marina Bay. Each is crossed by the railroad tracks. Each is blocked by a train at some point during the day. Complications ensue.

It's a similar story in nearby Parchester Village.

There is no model railroad club in America that has such an interest in trains as the 5,000 residents of Marina Bay. They know all the subtleties. Forget red states and blue states, in Marina Bay they want to talk about orange locomotives and blue locomotives.

As Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, himself a Marina Bay resident, says, if you see a blue locomotive pulling a train, things aren't so bad. That means an engine from the switching yard (conveniently located smack in the middle of condos, shops and businesses) is moving some cars around. You probably won't have to wait more than 10 or 15 minutes for the intersection to clear.

But if a Marina Bay resident is coming down Marina Bay Parkway and spots an orange engine, it sets off a take on that opening scene from the "Fantasy Island" TV show.

"Da train! Da train!" they shout, hanging U-turns and frantically rushing down side streets in an attempt to get ahead of the chugging roadblock.

"It's a game," says Sandi Genser-Maack, director of communications and events for the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, "but not a fun one."

Gioia knows this issue forward and backward. The deal is that the Burlington Northern Santa Fe trains travel back and forth between the Port of Richmond and the Port of Oakland. The bad news is that the trains can be very, very long -- often a mile in length. And the worst news is, because of twists and turns in the track, the trains must travel very, very slowly.

"They made some improvement in the track," Gioia says. "The trains used to go 5 mph. Now they are up to 10 mph."

Whoa! Ten mph? Casey Jones, slow that train.

The point is that the train chugs lethargically through the crossing while traffic backs up for blocks and blocks. Sherry Salour, the owner of Café Teatro next to the tracks, says a wait of "10 minutes is for a small train. For longer trains, it takes forever."

The trains, by the way, do not follow a set schedule. It is just as likely that you might be stopped at 11 p.m. as 10 in the morning. Oh, and when the locomotive rolls by the new condos, they are required by federal law to blow the whistle at every intersection, even at 2 a.m. So sleep tight.

It isn't just annoying; it could be dangerous. When his wife was pregnant with his daughter, Gioia says, he had a recurring nightmare that she'd go into labor and they'd end up stuck at the crossing. There are no emergency facilities on the bay side of the tracks, so if someone had a heart attack, for example, or if fire trucks were racing to a disaster, they'd just have to wait and hope for the best.

It is not as if nothing has been done. In May of 2003, Gioia introduced a resolution that was passed unanimously by his fellow supervisors. It was terrific, full of such bureaucratic words as "whereas" and "therefore" and calling on the railroad companies to reduce the length of their trains and increase the speed.

The result?

"Let's just say," Gioia observes, "if they made an effort, it doesn't show."

There are other proposals: building an expensive overpass for cars at Marina Bay Parkway, finding a way to end-run the tracks at the end of town, and getting Union Pacific to let BNSF trains use UP tracks. That would keep the long trains out of Marina Bay. Gioia approached UP about the idea; the railroad gave it some thought, then declined politely.

UP spokesman John Bromley says with their trains and Amtrak too, the stretch is "one of the busiest of our California tracks," with as many as 50 trains running through the area daily. Adding the BNSF trains would affect "our own capacity" to handle the traffic, he added.

The sad fact is, as Genser-Maack says, it was the trains that built Richmond in the first place.

"It is like when there is an airport out in the middle of nowhere and then they build houses around it," Genser-Maack says. "People rant and rave, but the trains were here first."

"What this is," says Gioia, "is the classic case of a growing residential neighborhood in what was once an industrial area."

And it is the sort of conflict we may see more of as developments fill in the available land. Industrial plants, rusting factories and toxic waste may all be problems.

But don't ask them in Marina Bay what to do about it. They only know one thing: Their favorite train car is the caboose. Because that means the end of the train has passed.

*C.W. Nevius' column appears Tuesday and Saturday in the Bay Area section and Friday's in East Bay Life. E-mail C.W. Nevius at [cwnevius@sfchronicle.com](mailto:cwnevius@sfchronicle.com).*

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