Editorial: Is Marin Supervisor Damon Connolly a Closet Climate-Change Denier?

He's all greeny when it's politically easy, but he's leading the charge to sabotage the bike path on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge
Marin County Supervisors Damon Connolly and Katie Rice posing in front of an electric bus. Photo from Connolly's Facebook page

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Marin Supervisor Damon Connolly, who represents San Rafael, boasts about electric buses, preparing for sea-level rise, and supporting relatively uncontroversial bike paths. But when it comes to having political spine and actually pushing back against motoring interests, he takes a different tack; he's actively trying to switch the bike and pedestrian path planned for the Richmond-San Rafael bridge into another lane for cars.
Connolly sits on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Bay Area Toll Authority and Transportation Authority of Marin (TAM) governing boards. *Last year, he led a charge to make the shoulder on the top deck of the Richmond San-Rafael bridge—long slated to become a two-way bicycle and pedestrian path—available as a *sixth* lane for motor vehicles during peak periods. Keep in mind that now there are three lanes for cars on the lower deck and two on the upper. The shoulder on the upper deck is still there for maintenance and emergency vehicles. In April, the shoulder will be opened to cyclists, so it can double as a bike commuting route.

The lane was to remain that way for four years, pending further evaluation. But now the Transportation Authority of Marin, thanks to a push by Connolly, wants to cut that pilot back to just six months.

Jean Sevinghaus, Marin member at large from the Caltrans District 4 Bicycle Advisory Committee, forwarded Streetsblog a **draft letter** from Dianne Steinhauser and Dan Cherrier, Deputy Executive Directors of the Transportation Authority of Marin, to be presented to the Board of Commissioners for approval tomorrow, Thursday Jan. 24.

*From the letter:*

BATA has considered a 4-year pilot as the suitable longevity of a multi-use-pathway-only utilization of the upper deck shoulder area. TAM requests an assessment period of 6 months be considered, commencing with the current planned opening of the multi-use path in April 2019. Studies of the structure and of traffic should be completed within the first six months of pathway operation, followed by a review and evaluation of options for operating the corridor by all the partners.

The record low unemployment in Marin County has Marin County employers stating that problems hiring and retaining employees is of great concern. The need to address the commute of employees coming from the East Bay is growing daily. We are concerned that a relatively small number of users of the multi-use path may adversely affect the ability of Marin workers to meet their employment obligations. Many of our teachers, safety workers such as police and fire, and other workers depend on the Bridge daily to get to work on time. TAM continues in our dedication to making this corridor operate as effectively as possible for all users. Supervisor Damon Connolly, our Metropolitan Transportation Commission/Bay Area Toll Authority Commissioner, and I are available to discuss this further with the BATA leadership and assist in moving these ideas forward.
A six-month trial—or even a four-year trial, if current conditions persist—will clearly show few cyclists using the bridge. That’s because TAM has not built safe connections to the bridge on the Marin side, explained Sevinghaus. “They’re doing a great job on the Richmond side. You can go from the Richmond side to the water side to downtown Berkeley, but on the Marin side there’s these glaring gaps where you have to ride along the freeway,” she added. “It’s still really dicey.”

Marin Supervisor Damon Connolly wants the planned bike and ped path, shown top right, turned into yet another lane for cars during “peak” periods.
Sevinghaus said riders will either be too intimidated to use the approaches or there will be a horrible crash that kills or maims a cyclist. Either way, “It all fits a self-fulfilling prophecy, because they aren’t putting muscle behind electric bike-share programs and the infrastructure to connect the bridge. If you don’t do that, you’re going to make it a failure, and then you’re going to say ‘see, it’s a failure,’” said Brett Thurber, co-founder of electric-assist bike maker The New Wheel, which has a shop in Larkspur, near where the bridge touches down in Marin.

Thurber points out that San Rafael would be a half-hour ride by e-bike from the BART station at Richmond. “That makes it competitive with driving.” He added that people come into his shop to price out bikes with the idea of switching from driving across the bridge to a bike-plus-transit option when the bridge is finally opened to bikes. But they can’t make the change without the infrastructure. “Expecting people to invest in a machine to do it with the range and performance to do it, day in and day out, doesn’t work if it’s a four-year pilot only—even less so with a six-month pilot.”

The irony, of course, is that opening up a westbound lane for cars isn’t going to solve traffic delays for motorists either, explained Dave Campbell, advocacy director for Bike East Bay, in a phone call with Streetsblog. The bottleneck going west, he said, is the toll plaza on the Richmond side. “If Damon Connolly can wave a magic wand and get rid of that, guess where that bottleneck will go–straight into his front yard, where the traffic flows into Marin County on 101. That’s all he’s going to achieve.”

Campbell said traffic going west from Richmond splits in two directions: south towards San Francisco and north to the rest of Marin and Sonoma. If Connolly really wants to help with the traffic problem, he should be lobbying hard to massively expand the newly opened Richmond-to-San Francisco ferry, to give East Bay commuters an alternative to the bridge. “Let’s hope the new ferry service will help the people going south to San Francisco. I’d love to know his opinion on that, being the transportation expert he is,” quipped Campbell. Streetsblog also has calls in to the Marin County Bicycle Coalition and will update this post accordingly.

Meanwhile, Tom Butt, the Mayor of Richmond, is away at the National Conference of Mayors; it appears that nobody in Richmond was consulted about the Marin attempt to reduce the pilot to six months. Streetsblog forwarded the letter to Alex Knox, Mayor Butt’s Chief of Staff, who replied that “…it appears to be completely counter to our goals and vision for the upper deck of the bridge.”
Either way, the study Connolly is proposing to accelerate appears to be a fait accompli: since TAM apparently has no intention of making safe connections to the bridge, bike ridership will be low and it will no doubt be opened up to cars. The biggest single emitters of greenhouse gases in Marin County (and the Bay Area) are cars. Adding more traffic to the bridge is only going to increase those emissions. And Connolly appears to be in denial of this simple fact.

The letter is due to be approved by the TAM Board this Thursday, tomorrow, Jan. 24, at 7 p.m., Marin County Civic Center, 3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 330, San Rafael.

If you live in Marin and want to share your thoughts with Connolly, his phone number is 415-473-7354 and his email is dconnolly@marincounty.org

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