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A Vision for Better Service:

Local BART Candidate Lobbies for Change

By Cathy Dausman



District 3 BART candidate Fred Lopez doesn't let his vision loss tie him down. Photo Cathy Dausman

Lafayette resident Fred Lopez lost his sight 14 years ago during a workplace accident, yet he still has a clear vision of what improvements he expects BART to make. The 63-year-old former federal lawyer is making his first run for public office, as a candidate for District 3 BART Director. Lopez faces opponents Anthony Pegram and Rebecca Saltzman for the seat currently occupied by Mary King. When asked what prompted him to become a candidate, Lopez says he read a BART-related news story.

Officially, Lopez is retired, but you'd never know it. He is currently a member of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's Policy Advisory Council and served on the Citizen Advisory Council for Contra Costa Transportation Authority. He lists affiliations with nine professional organizations, including National Blind Lawyers and the Hispanic National Bar Association.

A graduate from U.C. Berkeley's Boalt School of Law in 1979, Lopez began work with the Health, Education and Welfare's Office of Civil Rights in San Francisco before moving his family (Lopez and his wife Yolanda Baldovino share three sons) to Washington D.C. in 1980, and working his way up to senior counsel for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. He returned to the Bay Area in 1983 and moved to Lafayette in 1994.

Lopez lost his sight in 1998 on temporary duty in Washington D.C. While unloading boxes of evidence, the bungee cords enclosing the boxes suddenly broke, striking Lopez in the eyes and head. "I lost vision in one eye and never recovered it," he said.

As his vision continued to deteriorate, he stopped trial work, switched to criminal work and later to regulatory

work. When his eyesight worsened, Lopez became an advocate "for seniors, the blind and disabled." He says his blindness makes him dependent on public transit on a daily basis, and he's unhappy with current BART conditions.

The 40-year-old BART system, which was once hailed as a "silver bullet," has now become an embarrassment, Lopez says, citing a trio of crime, grime and accessibility issues. "Crime is escalating in the BART system. Lafayette and Orinda stations now show up in the top 10 crime stations due to car theft and break-ins."

Lopez also laments the current size of the BART police force and the time and "hassle" it takes for riders to simply report a crime. He advocates posting crime data on the BART website, and wants to see an increase in security cameras and the introduction of smart phone apps to speed up contact with law enforcement officials. He says safety would improve if riders simply looked up from their electronic devices.

Appearances also trouble Lopez. "The blight, the filth, the obnoxious odors of stations, restrooms, train cars, seats and carpets is pervasive throughout the BART system," he says. "Even if I'm offered a seat, I don't sit down." He says the Lafayette station is "not bad" where cleanliness is concerned, but "the rest are horrid."

Successfully navigating on or around BART is a personal issue for Lopez, who says "accessibility for seniors, the blind and [those with] mobility impairments is frequently [an] afterthought." He cites the recent Lafayette south BART renovation, which left an exit temporarily without curb cutouts, and BART elevators in North Berkeley and Bay Fair stations which exit directly and dangerously into busy parking lots.

He wants stations to broadcast train announcements in multiple languages, install better station signage, and employ more electronic interfacing between Clipper Card users and the system.

Asked what's right with BART, Lopez lists the transit authority's South Bay expansion, the introduction of Clipper Cards, the system's willingness to experiment and allowing bike riders on board. As for his opponents, Lopez calls them "kind and gracious" people. "If I had a magic wand," he says, "I'd put all three of us on the board."

The new Director for District 3 will be installed December 7 and will oversee Lamorinda (a portion of Lafayette falls in District 1) plus parts of Albany, Berkeley, Castro Valley, Cherryland, El Cerrito, Kensington, and Oakland, and Ashland, Piedmont and San Lorenzo.

Current BART Board of Directors are listed online at: <http://www.bart.gov/about/bod/index.aspx>.

District 3 Candidate Information:

Fred Lopez: www.fredwlopezbartdirector.com

Anthony Pegram: <http://anthonypegrambartboard.com/>

Rebecca Saltzman: <http://www.rebeccaforbart.com/>

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