

Analyzing the Regional Economic Importance of the I-680 Corridor in Contra Costa County

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Contra Costa County plays a vital role in the Bay Area economy. Not only does the county boast significant economic activity on its own—with a gross domestic product of \$77 billion in 2020—but it also sits in the center of a nine-county region and a broader megaregion that is the leader in innovation nationally. The county's geographic positioning makes it an important regional and megaregional crossroads. In particular, the I-680 corridor plays a pivotal part in the movement of people and goods into, out of, and within the county.

The I-680 corridor runs through the county's largest job and population centers and connects to the region's biggest employment hubs. It provides a critical connection for Contra Costa County residents and others commuting into and through the county from the north—many of whom head south to Silicon Valley or west to San Francisco for work. For those traveling to the north, the I-680 corridor provides connections into Solano County and onto Sacramento.

Regional population and employment growth patterns over the last decade have increased the I-680 corridor's importance in connecting households to jobs across the region. The Bay Area's housing affordability crisis has pushed families to look to the East Bay (which includes Contra Costa County and Alameda County) for more affordable housing options with more space. According to Redfin, the median home price in Contra Costa County was \$850,000 as of early 2022. That same number for San Francisco County was near \$1.5 million, while Santa Clara County's median home sale prices now exceed \$1.6 million.

This cost difference has made Contra Costa County attractive for many families looking to purchase a home. Contra Costa County was the only county in the nine-county Bay Area to grow its population during 2020—now nearing 1.2 million. Even before the pandemic, Contra Costa County was experiencing rapid population growth. From 2011 to 2020, the county grew by 8.4%—the third fastest growth of all Bay Area counties—adding 100,000 residents. While population has shifted to east in the Bay Area region, job concentrations remain along the coast in San Francisco and in Silicon Valley. Between 2012 and 2019, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties combined to add 420,000 jobs. In the two East Bay counties—Alameda and Contra Costa—171,000 jobs were added over the same period.

A rise in relocations to Contra Costa County and rapid job growth in nearby employment centers over the past decade have contributed to the lengthening of daily commutes. According to 2019 Census data, Contra Costa County residents experience the worst commute of any county in California. The average commute time is 38.7 minutes, the 33rd longest of any county nationwide. Approximately 9.2% of workers residing in the county spend 90 minutes or more traveling to work, and the county has experienced a 102% increase in the number of its residents commuting more than 90 minutes since 2009.

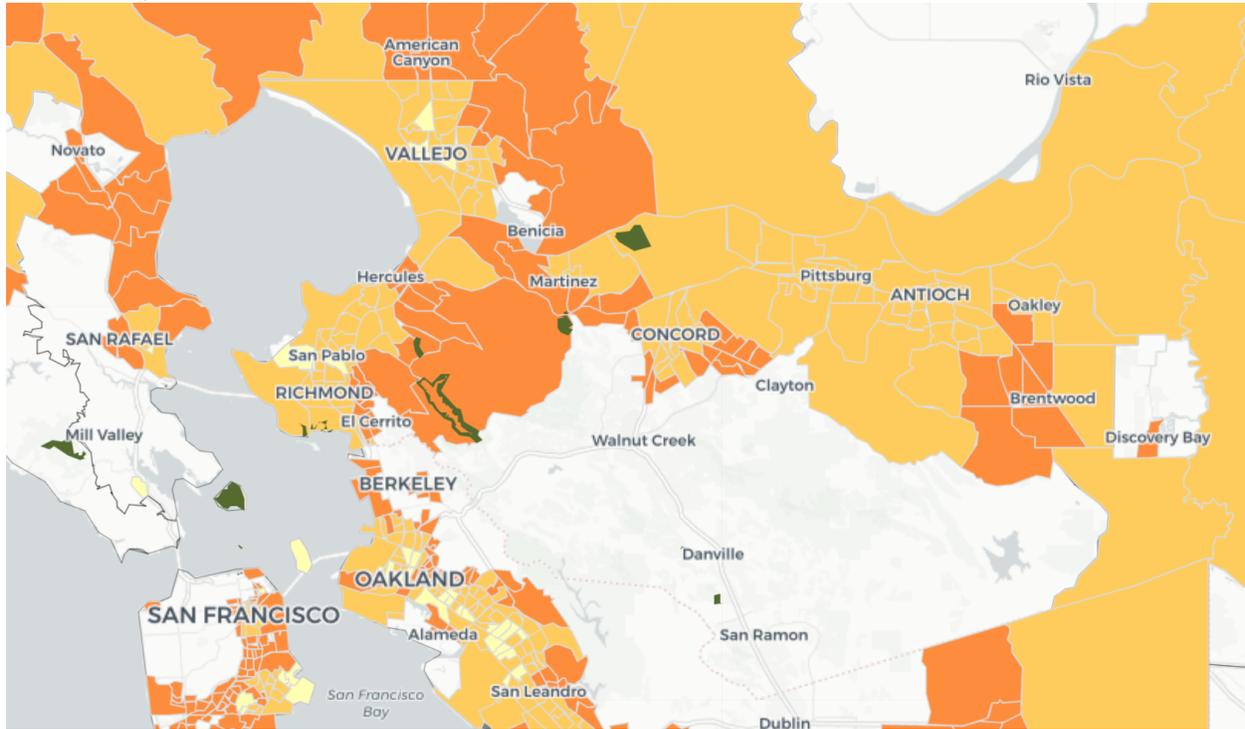
The COVID-19 pandemic has made mobility and innovation investments in I-680 even more important, as housing and work location preferences have continued to shift to the east away from San Francisco. The I-680 corridor's economic importance is illustrated by the following facts:

- Of the county's approximately 370,000 pre-pandemic jobs, more than 210,000 were in a city or town on or adjacent to the I-680 corridor, showing that employers value transportation connectivity.
- Pre-COVID-19, more than 40% of respondents to a survey of residents adjacent to the corridor said they traveled in the I-680 corridor every day or nearly every day.
- From north to south, the I-680 corridor allows for workers and residents to commute into and out of:
 - Martinez, which hosts the county's administrative functions,
 - Concord, where autonomous vehicle testing occurs at GoMentum Station,
 - Walnut Creek, which has over 5 million square feet of office inventory, and
 - San Ramon, where the Bishop Ranch office park is home to multiple Fortune 500 companies.
- More than 30,000 Contra Costa County residents worked in neighboring Santa Clara County in 2019, while 15,000 Santa Clara County residents worked in Contra Costa County. As the corridor connecting Contra Costa County to Silicon Valley, these commuters rely on I-680.
- Residents of counties to the north—such as Napa, Solano, Sacramento, and Yolo counties—are using the corridor to travel into the East Bay or into Silicon Valley. I-680 also provides access to jobs for Bay Area residents in the Sacramento region, and connections to Amtrak's Capitol Corridor in Martinez allow for travel throughout the megaregion.

While the cities along the corridor have significant economic activity that is enabled by the connectivity provided by I-680, their future growth and the region's future growth depends on efficient travel through the corridor. According to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the stretch of I-680 northbound from Danville to Pleasant Hill is the 10th most congested corridor in the entire region as of 2017. During 2017, Caltrans data shows I-680 with over 1.3 million vehicle hours of delay, with segments of I-680 in Contra Costa County averaging daily traffic totals near 150,000 vehicles. Between 2010 to 2017, traffic congestion—defined as motorists traveling along freeways at speeds of 35 miles an hour or slower—grew by 80% across the region, according to MTC.

The proposed projects in 680 Forward will produce important time travel savings within the corridor. The I-680 express lane completion will increase throughput for carpools and decrease travel times in general purpose lanes. As an example of the potential for travel time savings, the express lane project on I-580 in Alameda County reduced overall travel times in the westbound AM peak direction by 5 minutes (28%) and in the eastbound PM peak direction by 3 minutes (19%). Annual vehicle hours of severe delay decreased by 47%.

Disadvantaged Census Tracts in Contra Costa and Solano Counties



Source: UC Berkeley Othering and Belonging Institute

The 680 Forward projects bring important transportation benefits to disadvantaged communities. Areas highlighted in the map above mark low resource (yellow) and moderate resource (orange) census tracts. These communities—in the northern and eastern part of the county and in Solano County to the north—will benefit from projects that provide better and more reliable transit within the corridor and faster overall travel times. Approximately 42% of Contra Costa County’s resident workforce is employed outside of the county, meaning that the intraregional trips made possible by I-680 are important for expanding the labor shed and creating opportunity. The county’s northern waterfront is also home to many of Contra Costa County’s more than 40,000 manufacturing jobs, and the I-680 corridor provides a critical artery for the movement of both workers and goods to support this industry.

As the county continues to grow its population, projects like transit shared mobility hubs will provide residents and workers with more options for their trips and an ability to combine modes. According to a resident survey, fewer than half of all trips in the corridor were multi-modal, and 80% of respondents said their primary mode for trips was a single occupancy vehicle—both numbers highlight the opportunity for mode shift.

As COVID-19 may permanently shift commute dynamics for many office workers, commutes may become longer but less frequent. Multi-modal travel options and efficient long-distance transit will take on greater importance in supporting the economy, and suburban corridors will become even more important in connecting jobs with homes. The 680 Forward projects are poised to accommodate future regional travel preferences in innovative and effective ways.