

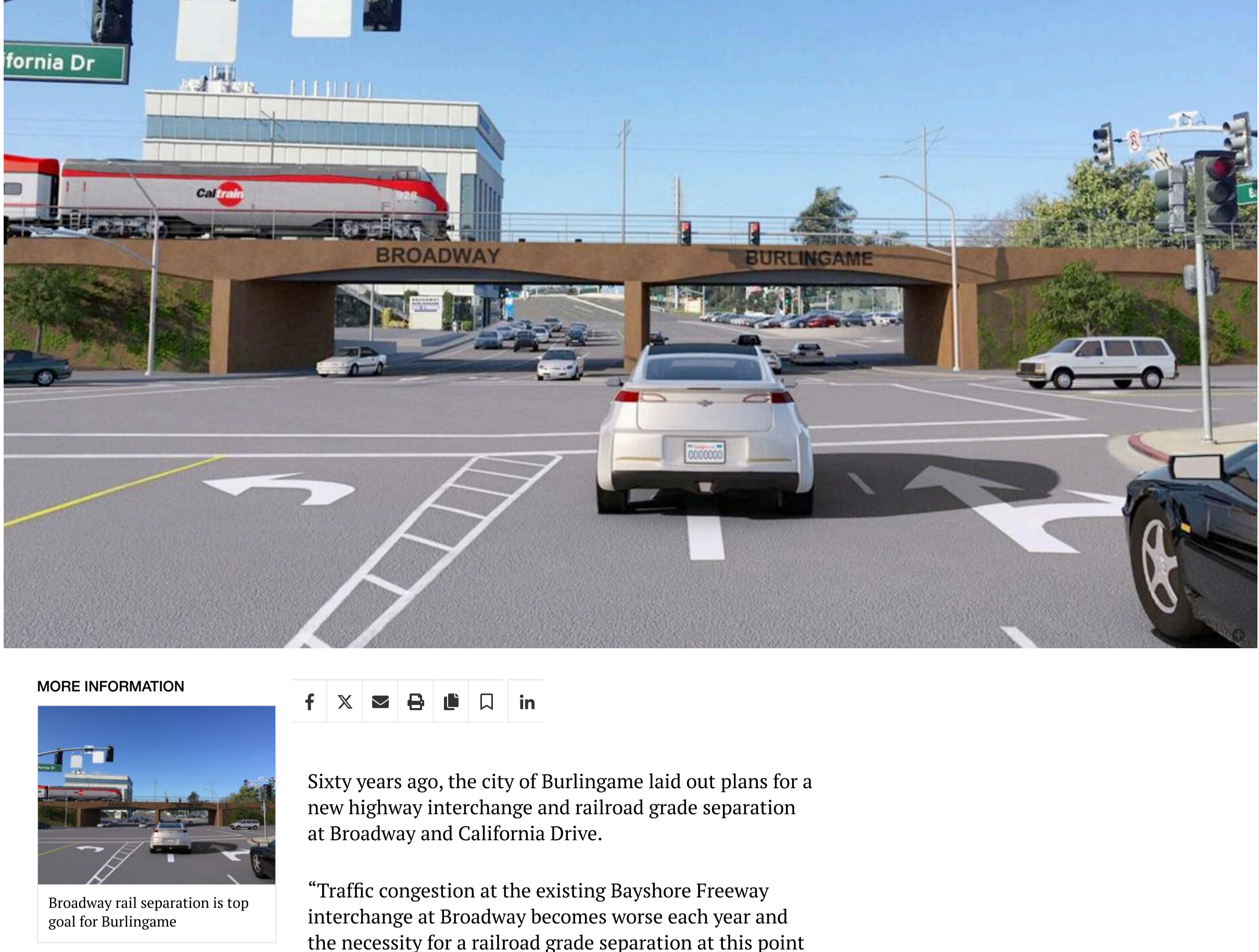
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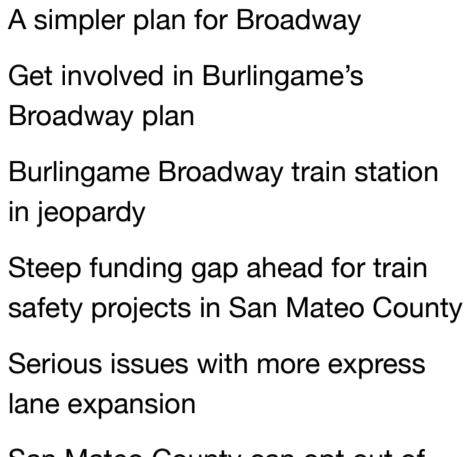
## 1965 to now: Decades add huge cost to rail project in Burlingame

Broadway grade separation feels further away than ever, new \$600M price tag has thrown funding into doubt

By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff  
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Sixty years ago, the city of Burlingame laid out plans for a new highway interchange and railroad grade separation at Broadway and California Drive.

"Traffic congestion at the existing Baysshore Freeway interchange at Broadway becomes worse each year and the necessity for a railroad grade separation at this point is apparent to all who enter the city of Burlingame," city documents from 1965 read.

At that time, the city estimated that a grade separation and highway interchange project would have cost \$4,273,000 in total — around \$42 million in value today. The grade separation at the intersection was ranked 30th on a statewide priority list by the California Public Utilities Commission.

But that project — labeled by city staff even in 1965 as "a need that has been recognized for years" — still remains unconstructed.

Now, however, it's ranked the most dangerous and highest priority grade separation project in the state, and plans for constructing it are set to cost upwards of \$600 million. The railroad itself is owned by Caltrain, that has been working with the city of Burlingame for years as it unsuccessfully aims to elevate the railway tracks above the road.

"It's the most dangerous intersection in the state of California," Burlingame Councilmember Donna Colson said. "We have to upgrade the safety for all the drivers that are coming back and forth."

It's not only the congestion. There have been eight vehicle strikes, two fatal, at or near the crossing in the past five years. One of the deaths prompted a lawsuit alleging responsible agencies failed to sufficiently mitigate the risks in a particularly dangerous crossing that left Cynthia Robinson stuck on the train tracks while waiting at a traffic stop.

Finally fixing the challenging intersection could come with downsides of its own — that newly heightened \$600 million price tag might throw the nearby Broadway train station into doubt.

As the city and Caltrain meet and discuss potential redesigns for the project, the cheapest option presented appears to be eliminating the stop altogether, Colson said. Estimates for the grade separation without a train station are around \$383 million, Colson said, based on numbers the city received this week from Caltrain.

Currently, the train stops at the Broadway station only on weekends and holidays, however, Caltrain originally said it would fully open once tracks were electrified. Aside from community desire for a fully operational Caltrain station, eliminating it as a stop in all circumstances poses serious planning concerns for the Broadway commercial area.

"If we close the train station then we don't want to have just [Broadway] zoned for all this transit-oriented, high-density development that does not include parking," Colson said. "That would be the poster child for bad planning and an absolute disaster."

### Funding and construction issues

In recent years, the major sticking point for the grade separation project has been an inability to fund it.

At the beginning of 2024, cost estimates for the project were hovering around \$325 million and hopes were high that construction would begin as early as March 2025. But recent electrification at the Caltrain tracks, combined with the steeply rising costs of construction materials and development, changed that number dramatically, Burlingame City Manager Lisa Goldman said.

"The actual cost has skyrocketed from \$316 million to about \$600 — or more — million dollars," she said. "So that was a pretty shocking discovery."

While grade separation efforts were completed in nearby cities like South San Francisco, San Bruno and San Mateo prior to Caltrain electrification, the Burlingame project wasn't ready and designs remain only at 65% completion, Caltrain spokesperson Dan Lieberman said.

"Delaying the electrification project would have incurred far greater costs, and that would be while losing the benefit of having a faster electric system running on entirely emission-free renewable power," Lieberman said. "The Burlingame project wasn't funded at the time the designs were complete, so ultimately, we had to move forward."

### Power play

With electrification completed, Caltrain tracks would have to be de-electrified and service stopped to complete the grade separation, making the project both longer and more expensive. Burlingame staff had been warning of this issue for years, Goldman said, but ultimately the lead agencies on the project — the city and Caltrain — were unable to successfully coordinate.

The added \$300 million in costs are leaving the project once again mired in doubt after a slow, arduous process to collect the funding needed.

Though it had been slow going at times — "why does it take from 2017 to almost 24 ... to implement the design that the whole city agreed upon?" Colson said: \$17 million had been committed from Burlingame, \$24 million secured in county transportation sales tax money, \$133 million in potential county sales tax funding and \$85 million in hard-fought state funding had been promised for the future.

There was about \$58 million left to secure, Goldman said, and Burlingame was planning to reapply for federal funding to cover that gap before the news about the cost doubling came in late summer. While finding the money to afford the increase seems untenable, the city — the agency tasked with amassing the funds — has little choice given the intersection's dangerous nature and regional impact, Colson said.

"I don't think it's fair for them to say the little town of Burlingame needs to come up with \$600 million," she said. "Our budget is \$85 million a year. We can, for 10 years, spend nothing on anything except for the grade separation and still not get there."

### Project history

Funding issues of this extreme nature hadn't always plagued the project.

In 1977, the city evaluated several options to address congestion and problems at the Broadway intersection, including relocating the train station platform, elevating the tracks or depressing the tracks, according to city documents.

The urgency of the grade separation had risen to number 13 or 14 on the California Public Utilities Commission priority list by 1977 and the total cost of a grade separation project was expected to total \$4,450,000 — in today's money, roughly \$23 million — only \$445,000 for which the city would have been responsible.

In today's money, Burlingame would have had to pay only \$2.3 million for a full grade separation at that time, although it chose not to proceed with it, according to meeting minutes. Both the railroad owners and the community would only be supportive of the road — or depression — where tracks went underneath the road — or moving the platform, the Public Works director said.

The city has taken various other steps to solve the traffic issues at Broadway and California Drive. In 2017, the nearby Broadway and Highway 101 overpass was successfully reconstructed — an original element of the 1965 plan that the city was hopeful would fix the ongoing traffic congestion and safety issues at the intersection, former Mayor Cathy Baylock said.

It was also an easier fix. At that time, plans and funding for a future grade separation were still uncertain, Baylock said.

"There wasn't really any consensus about how to do it and how to pay for it," she said. "At that point, we hadn't rebuilt the Broadway overcrossing, and I think the thought was, 'let's see if that helps with the traffic situation.'"

During that time, work on the grade separation project began again in earnest, Burlingame Public Works Director Syed Murtuza said.

"Originally, the community wanted the design to be completely underground railroad tracks, which was very expensive and unfeasible," he said. "Now the current design does not lower the road. It essentially raises the railroad tracks, and the road remains at the current level where it is."

The most current design, which Murtuza called "community-oriented," would also build a new Broadway train station. With the exception of the most recent cost increase, figures for the design hovered around the \$300 million to \$400 million range.

### Future

Despite the various hurdles, the grade separation remains a necessity, Colson said.

"In terms of advocacy, we don't have a choice," Colson said. "We're just going to have to do some outsized work. Burlingame is known for swinging above our fighting weight."

Right now, Caltrain's focus is on communicating accurate information to its various partners, Navi Dhaliwal, Caltrain government and community affairs manager, said.

"What we want to do from a Caltrain perspective, is make sure that we're continuing to provide the right information, like these cost estimates at these critical inflection points, so that we can move these projects in a fiscally responsible manner, so that folks who are aware of where the project stands," she said.

Dhaliwal highlighted steps the transit agency has taken to improve safety of the intersection, including installing artificially intelligence rail sentry technology to help stop crashes between trains and cars as well as road improvements. Caltrain is also planning to update signs and posts to help drivers navigate safely, she said.

While Burlingame is grateful for such additions, it doesn't change the need for a grade separation, Goldman said.

"You have to get the cars and the trucks and the bikes and the people ... off the path of where the train is traveling," she said. "You can't paint your way out of it or signalize your way out of it. That certainly helps. It'll help a lot. But the most important thing is to separate the roadway from the railway."

The next opportunity for public discussion on the project will be in early March, Dhaliwal said.

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