
SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Senator Dave Cortese, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SCR 193

Hearing Date: 8/11/2026

Author: Wiener

Version: 8/6/2026 Amended

Urgency: No

Fiscal: Yes

Consultant: Melissa White

SUBJECT: Emperor Norton Tunnel

DIGEST: This resolution designates the Yerba Buena Tunnel (#34-0004) on Interstate 80, located between postmile 7.719R and 7.821R in the City and County of San Francisco, as the “Emperor Norton Tunnel.”

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Assigns the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) the responsibility of operating and maintaining state highways, including the installation and maintenance of highway signs.

Committee Policy:

The committee has adopted a policy regarding the naming of state highways or structures. Under the policy, the committee will consider only those resolutions that meet all of the following criteria:

- 1) The person being honored must be deceased or a former elected public official who has been out of office for at least 25 years.
- 2) The person must have provided extraordinary public service or some exemplary contribution to the public good and have a connection to the community where the highway is located.
- 3) The naming must be done without cost to the state. Costs for signs and plaques must be paid by local or private sources.

- 4) The author or co-author of the resolution must represent the district in which the facility is located, and the resolution must identify the specific highway segment or structure being named.
- 5) The segment of highway being named must not exceed five miles in length.
- 6) The proposed designation must reflect a community consensus and be without local opposition.
- 7) The proposed designation may not supersede an existing designation unless the sponsor can document that a good faith effort has uncovered no opposition to rescinding the prior designation.

This resolution:

- 1) Recounts the life of Joshua “Emperor” Norton.
- 2) Designates the Yerba Buena Tunnel (#34-0004) on Interstate 80, located between postmile 7.719R and 7.821R in the City and County of San Francisco, as the “Emperor Norton Tunnel.”
- 3) Requests Caltrans to determine the cost of appropriate signs consistent with the signing requirements for the state highway system showing this special designation and, upon receiving donations from nonstate sources sufficient to cover that cost, to erect those signs.

COMMENTS:

- 1) *Purpose of the resolution.* According to the author, “Today, our country faces rising hate - whether political, racist, xenophobic, or religious. As a state and nation, we must stand against this hate and protect marginalized communities with moral clarity. Emperor Norton was a visionary public figure and iconic San Franciscan who espoused values of inclusion and religious freedom. He used his platform to resolutely support marginalized communities in his time. For this reason, he is greatly respected and honored by various communities across San Francisco. Officially naming the Yerba Buena Tunnel after Emperor Norton sends a strong message that California stands for acceptance and tolerance and stands against hate, while honoring the beloved iconic and visionary San Franciscan who called for the very bridge that stands in the Bay today.”

- 2) *Background.* Joshua Abraham Norton was born on February 4, 1818, in Deptford, England. He was raised, educated, and began working in South Africa, where his family moved when he was two years old. His parents were influential in founding the first Jewish synagogue and building the Jewish community on the Eastern Cape.

In 1849, Norton arrived as an immigrant in San Francisco and quickly established himself as a respected and prosperous commodities trader and commission merchant of foodstuffs. He also acquired significant real estate holdings in North Beach. In the mid-1850s Norton suffered disastrous financial and property losses following a failed effort to corner the market on rice.

On September 17, 1859, Norton publicly declared himself “Emperor of the United States,” and later added the title “Protector of Mexico” in 1866. Norton lived as “Emperor” for more than 20 years; known as “Norton I” or, less formally, as “Emperor Norton.” He resided in a top-floor room of the Eureka Lodgings at 624 Commercial Street in San Francisco from 1864 until his death. He was listed in city directories and the United States Census as “Emperor.”

As “Emperor,” Norton wore picturesque secondhand regalia that made him a regular subject for the leading photographers of the day. He became a familiar presence in the streets, parks, libraries, theaters, political lecture halls, and free-lunch counters of the city, recognized and often saluted wherever he went. He was also a fixture in the pages of newspapers throughout the state and country. He regularly visited locales in northern California, including Sacramento, where he kept tabs on the proceedings of state government and lobbied for the priorities of his own “imperial government.”

Emperor Norton distinguished himself as a reformer and early champion of the values of fairness, tolerance, self-determination, and the common good that came to be associated with his adopted city and region, and with gentle defiance and always with an eye to the future, he challenged existing norms, conventions, and prejudices, issuing more than 400 proclamations, some 250 of which were published in the Black-owned and -operated *The Pacific Appeal*. In his proclamations and elsewhere, he called out corruption of all kinds, warned of the dangers of religious sectarianism, and advocated for the dignity and rights of immigrants and other marginalized groups. Specifically, he insisted that courts allow Chinese testimony and writing that “the eyes of the Emperor will be upon anyone who shall council any outrage or wrong on the Chinese,” that Black people be allowed to attend public schools and ride public streetcars, that Native Americans not have their lands stolen, and that women have the right to vote.

In 1872, Emperor Norton issued three proclamations setting out the vision for a bay-spanning bridge linking the Cities of Oakland and San Francisco, specifying that the bridge be routed via “Goat Island,” known today as Yerba Buena Island. The San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge was built across that route, opening in November 1936, and celebrates its 90th anniversary this year.

Emperor Norton died on January 8, 1880. His funeral attended by a reported 10,000 people from all stations of life, and he was buried in San Francisco's Masonic Cemetery. His death was noted in newspapers from 33 current and future states of the Union. In 1934, he was reburied at Woodlawn Memorial Park in the City of Colma, a location that has been a pilgrimage site for generations. Today, Emperor Norton is recognized and revered as a pioneer ambassador and folk hero of San Francisco and early California, a figure whose story of reinvention continues to symbolize the promise of California.

Writing in support, the San Francisco Historical Society states, “Various communities – including the LGBTQ, Chinese, and Jewish communities – have heralded him as a model for community activism and resistance to oppression, bigotry, and authoritarianism. At a time when racism, bigotry, and sectarianism fueled a wave of legal Chinese exclusion in San Francisco, California, and the United States, Emperor Norton was a voice of moral clarity against exclusion, violence, and civic hostility. He fought for the values of fairness, tolerance, freedom of religion, and self-determination – all values that are particularly important to honor and defend in the present day.”

Further, “On the 90th anniversary of the Bay Bridge and the 180th anniversary of Emperor Norton’s arrival to the United States, we strongly support naming the yet-to-be officially named Yerba Buena Tunnel after Emperor Norton in recognition of the inclusionary values he is known for and his role in shaping public opinion on a Bay Bridge connection.”

- 3) *Consistent with committee policy.* This resolution is consistent with committee policy.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: No

POSITIONS: (Communicated to the committee by Monday, August 10, 2026.)

SUPPORT:

The Emperor Norton Trust (sponsor)
California Lodge No. 1 F&AM
Chinese Historical Society of America
Imperial Council of San Francisco, INC.
San Francisco Bay Chapter, Freedom From Religion Foundation
San Francisco Historical Society
San Francisco History Association
Treasure Island Museum

OPPOSITION:

None received

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