

Traffic Congestion in the Bay Area has been Getting Steadily Worse for 35 years:

It's time for a New Approach

A BATWG Report

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Bay Area Transportation Working Group
(BATWG)

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A.) Better Mobility without the Gridlock

As anyone who drives in the Bay Area knows well, the traffic congestion in our region is bad and getting worse. Compounding the situation is the fact that the per capita use of trains and buses is dropping. Ever wondered why this is?

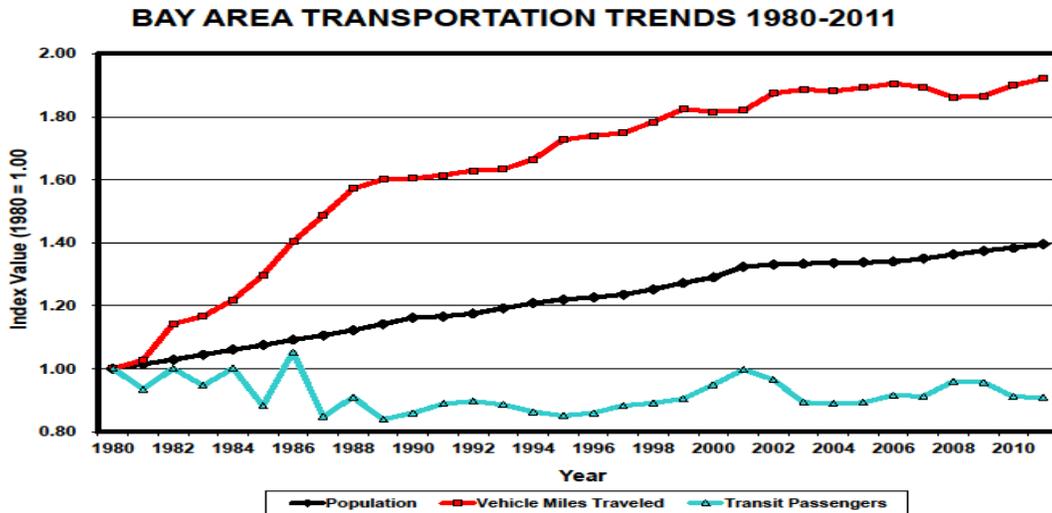
The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) has been in existence since 1971. Charged with "planning, coordinating and financing" transportation in the Bay Area, MTC has received and distributed tens of billions in State and federal transportation dollars. A large part of this huge inflow of funds has gone to highway expansions and large locally-initiated public transit projects favored and actively promoted by MTC. Yet the situation continues to get worse as drivers, bus riders and businesses are increasingly impeded by worsening gridlock.

Although not solely responsible for these problems MTC, through its policies, priorities and capital funding decisions, has failed to either strengthen public transit operations or ease congestion.

So the question becomes: Is there anything that can be done to reverse these destructive trends? We think so. The greater San Francisco Bay Area has a choice. It can continue to acquiesce to the current scatter-shot and generally ineffective way of allocating transportation funds, thereby perpetuating today's destructive regional transportation trends. Or it can take steps to ensure that today's over-reliance on the private automobile is replaced with a healthier mix of automobiles, pedestrians, trains, buses, boats and bicycles, coupled with the gradual implementation of a well thought-out and thoroughly-vetted regional land use plan.

B.) Existing Conditions at MTC

1. Short-sighted Planning: As noted, much of the Bay Area remains mired in gridlock because of MTC's 43-year failure to properly and prudently allocate the tens of billions of transportation dollars that pass through its hands. The inevitable consequence of this failure is depicted in the following chart, prepared by CPA Tom Rubin using MTC's own data base:



These dismal trends have combined to make traffic gridlock in the Bay Area the third worst in the nation, topped only by Los Angeles and Honolulu. In Sum:

- Bay Area Population.....Up
- Bay Area Vehicle Miles Traveled.....Up
- Bay Area Traffic Congestion.....Worse
- Bay Area per capita Transit Ridership.....Down

MTC was formed to encourage Bay Area counties, cities and towns to work together to achieve regional transportation objectives. Through leadership and coordination the new regional transportation agency was expected to facilitate mobility while at the same time easing traffic congestion, thereby preserving and enhancing the economies and environments of the nine MTC counties.

Unfortunately, MTC has failed to meet those expectations.



2. Organized to Fail: MTC's staff, although large and well-paid, gets little regional direction or oversight from its 21-person Commission. This occurs in part because the Commission is comprised mostly of city and county elected officials already heavily burdened with local responsibilities. Many Board members must travel long distances to attend MTC meetings and seldom receive the local and MTC staff support needed to prepare them for dealing effectively with complex regional issues, often located far from their own local constituencies.

Because of weak regional oversight and input, MTC's "plans" are all too often a mix of Caltrans highway expansions (euphemistically called "bottleneck removals", "interchange upgrades" and "express lanes" these days) and local pet projects, cobbled together to give State and federal funding authorities the impression of regional unity. Lost in the process is a carefully thought out and well-vetted means of actually improving regional transportation.

MTC staff leadership appears to have concluded that it is safer and easier to cater to Caltrain and acquiesce to parochial objectives rather than assert and advance valid regional transportation objectives. Instead of developing the balanced and integrated plan long needed in the Bay Area, today's approach seems to be to cooperate with Caltrain and broker deals among local entities to make certain that everyone's parochial pet project gets its piece of the pie. The unfortunate result of this dismal process has been that much of the Region's transportation money that has passed through MTC hands during the last 35 years has been wasted. Even

major regional projects such as the BART/SFIA extension and Bay Bridge East Span (neither of which provide either traffic reductions or transit ridership increases) were conceived and developed as a result of parochial demands rather than serious attempts to address regional transportation problems.

3. Legacy of Wasteful and Contra-productive Projects: Large, publicly-funded projects that consume billions of scarce transportation dollars should do more than just create temporary construction employment. In addition they should invigorate local economies and improve life for everyone. With this in mind, it is useful to stop and consider MTC's 40 year record of presiding over Bay Area transportation projects. What follows is a partial list:

BART Extension to the San Francisco International Airport: As is typical of most large Bay Area transportation projects, the cost of BART/SFIA rose from the original estimated price of \$1.17 billion to \$1.7 billion, an increase of \$530 million. Because of its meander through Daly City and the Mission District, the trip from the Millbrae Station via BART to the Montgomery Station in downtown San Francisco today takes at least 18 minutes longer than it does via Caltrain or a SamTrans bus. As a result of the westerly detour and inconvenient Millbrae transfer, BART/SFIA ridership has failed to meet expectations. At \$250 million, BART/SFIA would have been a viable project. At \$1.7 billion it was an absurd waste of money.

MTC presided over the Bay Bridge East Span Project: The Loma Prieta Earthquake occurred in 1989. It took 24 years, until September 2, 2013, for the new East Span section to open to traffic. In 1998 the estimated price for the replacement structure was \$1 billion. Today the new structure, which allows no more traffic than its predecessor did 25 years ago, is expected to cost at least \$6.4 billion. Internationally acclaimed bridge designers have stated that with new foundations the original east span could have been seismically upgraded for a total price of less than \$2 billion. By opting for the exotic but vastly over-priced self-anchored suspension span, MTC and Caltrans managed to needlessly delay the project by at least 14 years while unnecessarily increasing its cost by \$5 billion. By anyone's measure, the new Bay Bridge East Span is costing California's taxpayers at least three times what it should be costing them.

MTC Strongly Promoted the Oakland Airport Connector (OAC):

There used to be a shuttle bus system between the Coliseum BART station and the Oakland Airport. The one-way, three-mile bus trip time took 12 minutes and cost \$3. Its replacement, the \$600,000,000 OAC, takes 15 minutes and costs \$6 for the same 3 mile, one-way trip.

MTC pushed the Presidio Freeway through the State approval process: This project started out as a straightforward seismic upgrade of the seismically unsafe Doyle Drive viaducts in the Presidio of San Francisco near the San Francisco Marina District. The price of the project, as set forth in the November 4, 2003 San Francisco Voter's Handbook, was \$420 million. The ultimate cost of the much larger and more intrusive Presidio Freeway is a carefully kept secret, but is judged to be at least \$2 billion.

MTC fully supported the Construction of San Francisco's Central Subway: This 1.7 mile light rail line was shown in the November 4, 2003 San Francisco Voter's Handbook as costing \$647 million, a price that has since soared by at least 250%.. Equally disturbing is the fact that the project was deceptively sold to unsuspecting politicians and others on the basis of grossly exaggerated trip time savings, wildly over-estimated ridership projections, and a projected \$3.2 million a year drop in Muni operating costs that later morphed into a \$15.1 million a year Muni operating cost increase.

MTC Acted in Violation of State Proposition 1A: Prop 1A, the high-speed rail (HSR) bond issue passed in 2008, set aside \$950 million to help pay for improving connections between local rail systems and HSR. This resulted in some worthwhile improvements, including the upgrading of LA's Union Station and improvements to Caltrain's commuter rail service.

However there were exceptions. Led by its Director, MTC improper diverted \$61.3 million in HSR connectivity funds to the Central Subway project. Traveling as it does on Fourth Street, the Central Subway doesn't come even close to connecting to HSR. In fact by diverting the existing Third Street light rail T-Line away from the Transbay Transit Center (San Francisco's HSR stop) to Fourth Street, the Central Subway project actually cut-off of what would have been an excellent connection to HSR from southeastern San Francisco.

MTC's \$6 billion HOT Lane Program: "HOT lanes" (now called "express lanes") are being built to give affluent motorists a way of bypassing highway slowdowns and gridlock. MTC's program adds a new wrinkle. Under a uniquely backward-looking approach, MTC is quietly including over 300 new lane miles of freeway in the program, thereby enlarging the freeways, a practice which virtually everyone now knows does little but encourage more freeway driving and ultimately more urban traffic congestion.

MTC's Unaccountable Opposition to Upgrading ACE: As noted above, the steadily growing demand for BART transbay service will soon exceed BART's transbay carrying-capacity. For this reason the need for a second passenger rail line across the Bay has long been recognized. By far the cheapest and quickest way of easing pressures on both Bay Area freeways and BART's already over-crowded transbay section would be to significantly upgrade and extend ACE across a rebuilt Dumbarton rail bridge and then via the Caltrain right-of-way into downtown San Francisco. Thanks to a consistent lack of MTC support, this vital project languishes for the lack of attention and funding.

MTC's Support of the ill-conceived BART/Livermore Extension: This 11.3 mile extension from BART's East Dublin Station to Greenville Road in the low density eastern end of Alameda County would cost a projected \$3.2 billion. As BART itself has shown, there are much cheaper and better ways of providing excellent transit service to the people of Livermore and others at the east end of Alameda County.

4. Legacy of Missed Opportunities: Here are examples of projects of outstanding potential that MTC has either blocked or let languish and sometimes die by inattention.

Altamont versus Pacheco: The California High Speed Rail Authority (CAHSRA) had two Bay Area access choices. The Altamont alignment would have paralleled both I-580 and the Altamont Commuter Express rail service, thereby providing the Region with a once-in-a-century opportunity to ease congestion between the eastern end of Alameda County and San Joaquin County, and the inner parts of the Bay Area. MTC should therefore have become a major

champion of Altamont. Instead it stepped back and permitted parochial South Bay interests to push the CAHSRA into choosing the Pacheco alignment 50 miles to the South, where it provides virtually no regional transportation benefits.

Returning Passenger Rail Service to the Bay Bridge: In 1998 the voters of San Francisco, Oakland, Emeryville and Berkeley voted overwhelmingly to study a proposal to return passenger rail service to the Bay Bridge. As a result, MTC reluctantly hired a consultant to study the idea. In late 2000 the Consultant submitted its report concluding that the idea was “technically feasible but costly”. Costly compared to what? MTC didn't ask. Instead its director killed the Bridge Rail idea the next day. As a result a problem that could have been solved for \$6 billion will now cost upwards of \$25 billion

Retrofitting the Cantilever Span: Retrofitting the existing cantilever span would have been a far better choice than its grotesquely over-priced replacement, as is now obvious to almost everyone.

BART's Transbay Capacity Crunch: This impending problem was recognized and well publicized over 30 years ago. Yet MTC has never seen fit to give the problem the needed attention and priority.

The AC Transit Problem: AC Transit has long needed help in strengthening its bus deployment and marketing functions so as to re-attract its departing ridership. Despite the significant damage to the region that has been caused by the lack of a well-functioning East Bay bus system, MTC has never felt it necessary to give the problem attention or priority it deserves.

MTC's Failure to Establish a Regional Bus Operation: There are many parts of the Region that are poorly served by BART and could never be well served by BART. For this reason it has been recognized a half a century and talked about at MTC since its inception in 1971 that the Region needs a regional bus operation to provide longer distance service where BART can't provide it. Yet still no regional bus service.

Upgrading ACE and Connecting it to San Francisco: The Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) rail line to San Jose is being upgraded. To ease crowding on BART's transbay section and reduce the traffic backups on I-580, I-680, I-238, I-880 and Highway 92, there has long been a plan to extend a branch of

an upgraded ACE service via a rebuilt Dumbarton rail bridge and the Caltrain right-of-way to downtown San Francisco. Instead of giving this clearly-needed second transbay rail connection the priority it deserves, MTC appears to regard the San Francisco branch as nothing but a cash cow to help pay for favored projects of lesser importance.

Caltrain and High Speed Rail: To reduce the excessive amount of north-south automobile traffic along the Peninsula and into San Francisco, the overriding need to upgrade and extend Caltrain into downtown San Francisco has long been recognized. However, in part because of years of inattention and lack of interest on the part of MTC, this project has languished. A dozen years ago the problem became even more challenging when it was realized that Caltrain and the California High Speed Rail Authority (CAHSRA) were in major disagreement over how best to operate their respective systems jointly in the same right-of-way and on same set of tracks. Despite the regional implications of these Peninsula rail problems of long standing, MTC has adopted its usual passive and "above the fray" approach, leaving it to the two agencies to work out their differences.

5. An Unproductive Mix of MTC and County CMA's: To understand how so many wasteful and counter-productive projects managed to rise to the top of the regional priority list, consider the relationship between the County Congestion Management Agencies (CMA's) and MTC. In the early 1990's the CMAs were established to help direct gas tax funds to multi-modal projects and coordinate intra-county transportation planning. In the Bay Area MTC requires each CMA to prepare plans and prioritize expenditures for its county. MTC then puts together a regional "plan" for submittal to State and federal agencies for funding.

Unfortunately, instead of ensuring that the County plans are adapted to and incorporated into a carefully prepared and well thought-out regional plan, MTC merely staples the various local plans together and ships the package off to Sacramento and Washington. While this approach may ensure the "buy-in" of local politicians wedded to local projects, it denies the Region the coordinated plan needed to ensure the usefulness of each project. This disjointed approach fails the Bay Area in three important ways:

a.) First, there is no mechanism for ensuring that transportation systems affecting more than one jurisdiction are properly coordinated. The Bay Area abounds with examples of where such coordination is sorely needed. In the West

Bay, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties need to jointly address the heavy north-south traffic congestion that constricts the employment centers of all three counties. In Alameda and Contra Costa counties, there is an overriding need to reduce traffic along Highway's I-580 and I-680, and along the I-80 Corridor. Throughout the Region, passenger rail and bus systems need to function more effectively and in a more coordinated manner. As the Region's central planning group MTC should be working actively with the involved agencies to help solve such problems.

b.) Second, regardless of merit the County projects submitted to and subsequently approved by MTC tend to be those favored by local political cabals and economic interests. As a result, Bay Area transportation funds are too often wasted on weak and ill-conceived or counterproductive projects that fail to address either legitimate local needs or regional needs.

c.) Third, leaving the decisions to Caltrans and the county CMA's means that virtually no priority is given to the Region's longer range transportation needs.

6. The Region has a Choice: MTC's habitual misallocation of capital funding and failure to carry out its regional transportation planning responsibilities coupled with the CMAs' tendency to focus on local issues have contributed materially to the Bay Area's debilitating traffic congestion and declining per capita use of public transit.

This leaves the Region with a clear choice. It can continue to accept the current way of allocating transportation funds, thereby assuring the continued weakness of the Region's transit systems coupled with ever worsening traffic congestion. Or it can take the steps needed to remedy the situation.

What are the choices? Over the years various ways of improving regional planning, coordination and financing have been proposed. Improvement ideas have ranged from better ways of selecting MTC commissioners, to giving MTC more power, to doing away with the agency altogether. What is outlined below is a compromise. It is intended to foster regional transportation while at the same time holding MTC to the highest standards of transparency and responsiveness to its many local constituencies.

C.) Toward a Balanced Transportation System



1. Introduction: A regional transportation agency and its commissioners should execute policies and allocate funds to meet the short, middle and long range transportation needs of the region. The proposal outlined below is designed to improve the structure and functioning of MTC so it can:

- o Bring decision-making closer to those affected
- o Strike a reasonable balance between local and regional transportation needs
- o In a growing region, coordinate transportation improvements with transit-oriented land use development
- o Improve the objectivity, cost-effectiveness and practicality of the decision-making process
- o Foster greater transparency and accountability

The three-part proposal outlined below seeks to accomplish these objectives by decentralizing MTC, by ensuring that local and county plans fit properly into a well-conceived regional plan and by fostering a climate in which MTC commissioners can make better and more informed decisions.

2. New Organizational Structure for MTC: MTC would be comprised of a Regional Headquarters and five District offices, each with its own locally-selected Commissioners.

a.) MTC's 5 District Offices and District Commissioners:

District One: the North Bay Counties of Marin, Sonoma, Solano and Napa

District Two: Contra Costa County

District Three: Alameda County

District Four: Santa Clara County

District Five: San Mateo and San Francisco Counties

Each District would have a district staff and its own 9 to 11 member Board of Commissioners, as directly elected or appointed from within the District. Most of MTC's day-to-day planning, programming, priority-setting and outreach activities would be accomplished in and by the District offices.

The District Boards would meet at least once a month.

The congestion management and project priority-setting function that currently takes place within the County congestion management agencies could productively be shifted to the appropriate MTC district offices.

Any resident of a District could offer himself or herself as a candidate for a District Board seat. Candidates would file applications with the County Board of Supervisors with jurisdiction, setting forth their qualifications and reasons for seeking election to a MTC District Board.

Each County Board of Supervisors would determine how the MTC District Board members from its county would be selected. District Board members would serve up to two four-year terms, staggered so as to maintain continuity.

b.) MTC's Regional Board of Commissioners: The Regional Board of Commissioners (hereinafter Regional Board) would be made up of 18 voting members, 16 of which would be selected by District Boards from among their members. Regional Board members would serve up to four two-year terms, staggered so as to maintain continuity.

Sixteen of the 18 voting members of the Regional Board would be selected by the District Boards, apportioned to maintain the current County representation on MTC as follows:

District One - North Counties: four; one from each county

District Two - Contra Costa County: two

District Three - Alameda County: three

District Four - Santa Clara County: three

District Five - San Mateo and San Francisco Counties: four; including two from San Mateo County and two from San Francisco County

The Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) and Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) would each appoint one voting member. The BCDC appointee would continue to be a resident of San Francisco County.

The State and federal transportation departments, and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development would each appoint one non-voting member to MTC's Regional Board, bringing its total

membership to 21. This number could change in line with federal or State mandated requirements.

The primary responsibility of the Regional Board of Commissioners would be to ensure that Bay Area regional transportation development and funding resulted from a well-thought out and well-vetted regional transportation plan, updated annually. The Regional Board of Commissioners and its staff would also be responsible for making certain that the District Offices worked together on behalf of improving and better integrating the Region's transportation systems. Issues that involve more than one district would be addressed in joint meetings of the affected District staffs and/or District Boards of Commissioners. If the affected Districts could not reach accord, the matter would be decided by the Regional Board.

The Regional Board would meet at least six times a year to deal with issues affecting the entire region.

c.) MTC's Regional Headquarters: Pursuant to Regional Board directives, a small MTC regional headquarters staff would make certain that District work proceeded in a coordinated manner in line with regional objectives. Staff functions would include helping to ensure that the various district staffs worked together on behalf of MTC objectives and assisting the Regional Board in representing the Bay Area to State and federal funding authorities.

To the extent practicable, the following administrative functions affecting both the District Offices and the Regional Headquarters would be consolidated in the Headquarters Office: payroll, personnel and human resources, accounting, budgeting, financial services, electronic data and communications systems, legal services, real estate acquisition, contracting and procurement, transportation forecasting and other functions best handled at a centralized location.

d.) Orientation and Training of New MTC Commissioners:

Each incoming Commissioner would attend and participate in a mandatory three-day orientation and training program. The objectives of the program would be to demonstrate how effective regional transportation planning can improve mobility and the environment of a large metropolitan region, and to familiarize the new commissioners with all aspects of MTC's operation. The program would be conducted by qualified trainers under the supervision of an independent entity such as the University of California's Department of City and Regional Planning.

e.) Prerequisites to MTC Fund Allocations and

Expenditures: To ensure that MTC's Commissioners are sufficiently prepared to render critically important regional transportation decisions, Staff would provide each Commissioner with an information packet explaining proposed actions. This packet would be available online at least 10 days ahead of the scheduled meeting.

Action involving the allocation or expenditure of over \$250,000 would require a two-thirds vote of the Regional Board. Any member of the Regional Board would be able to place any issue, other than sensitive personnel or legal matters, on the Regional Board's public hearing agenda.

D. Concluding Statement

Today's transportation decision-making and priority-setting doesn't work well in the Bay Area. Congestion on the freeways continues to increase and public transit continues to lose riders. Not all of these problems can be blamed on MTC. The fact that the Congestion Management Agencies in the nine MTC counties are charged with "managing congestion" rather than reducing it speaks volumes. The failure of the

CMA's as well as MTC to manage congestion effectively, much less reduce it, has contributed significantly to Bay Area roadways being among the most congested in the nation.

There ARE alternatives. Decentralized MTC district offices could ensure that local needs are heard and responded to. A relatively small but influential MTC headquarters staff, overseen by well-informed MTC regional commissioners, could ensure that District plans are properly integrated into a well-conceived Regional Transportation Plan, geared to improving regional public transit and easing regional traffic congestion.