



Bay Area Transportation Working Group (BATWG)

MAY 17, 2019

Forty Years of Transportation Decline is Enough! Needed: a Fresh Approach

Executive Summary:

During the last four decades, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) has consistently failed to fulfill its mandate to "*provide comprehensive regional transportation planning for the region*" or assert the regional leadership required to carry out its mission. On the contrary it has ducked most of the Bay Area's important regional problems and promoted ill-conceived local projects and highway expansions that have compounded the Region's traffic agonies.

In short it has shown little interest in promoting projects with the potential of either easing congestion or improving the public transit alternatives to driving. Rather than tackling regional problems in a regional way, MTC has been content to act as broker between the various local political cabals, each with its own set of highway-expanding or parochial interests to promote.

As a result, Bay Area traffic grows steadily worse and the per-capita ridership of most Bay Area transit systems declines.

Instead of looking at the Region's growing transportation problems as a whole, MTC has become content to distribute the \$billions in State, federal and bridge toll funds that pass through its hands to the local and highway-building groups it favors, thereby letting the Region evolve as if there were no MTC. This has led to tens of billions of dollars being squandered on non-essential and counterproductive projects.

The MTC Commission oversees, or at least is supposed to oversee, all aspects of the MTC operation. However, under the current system, Commissioners are usually local elected officials appointed by other locally elected officials. The results of four decades of this locally-focused selection process on MTC's performance are dismal.

As things stand, the local officials appointed to the Commission feel loyalty only to the cities and counties from which they come, or to various special interest groups that promote specific projects that may be, but often are not, in the best overall interest of the Region. Those becoming MTC Commissioners for the first time typically bring little or no regional transportation experience to their critically important new assignments. A lack of Commissioner understanding, or perhaps even interest, in MTC's underlying reasons for existence has made Commission members vulnerable to manipulation and pressure, which MTC staff has skillfully employed for decades.

The result is a regional transportation agency that has failed to stand up for or provide regional planning leadership. No one places emphasis on implementing expensively prepared and vetted regional system plans such as a Regional Rail Plan, Express Bus Master Plan and Water Transit Plan. No one steps up to resolve regional problems between or among local jurisdictions or transit agencies. No one directly addresses the critical underlying regional transportation problems such as highway backups, urban congestion and the irritating gaps between transit services. The Bay Area needs MTC Commissioners who are capable of representing the Region as a whole, while at the same time communicating effectively with the affected Bay Area cities and counties.

This BATWG White Paper lists ill-conceived MTC projects and missed opportunities, outlines some of the reasons for MTC's failure to meet its responsibilities and points to ways of restoring a proper transportation balance to the Bay Area. In "Next Steps" (Section 6) we outline two ways of restructuring MTC and ABAG to achieve this objective. There are others. The main point is that the MTC system as now arranged is not working and things need to change.

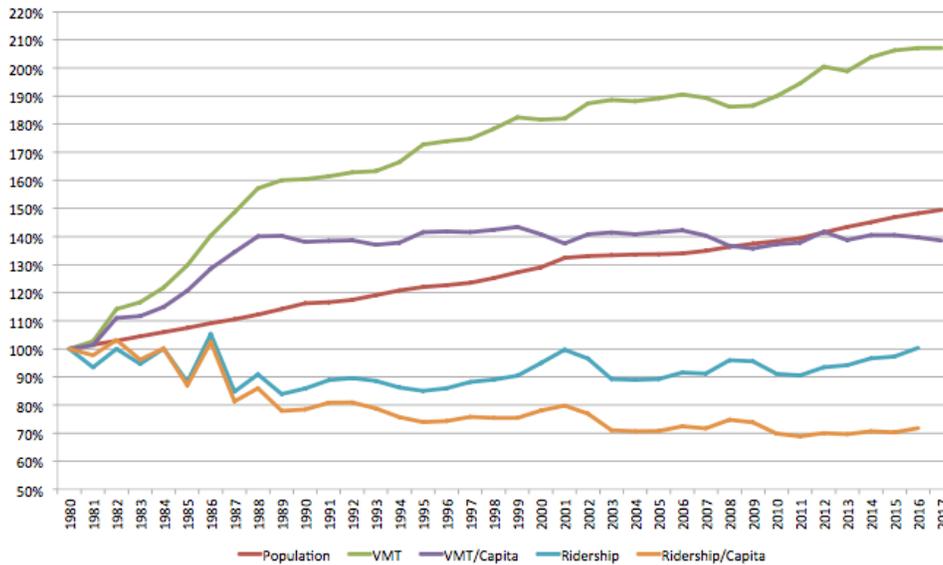
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1. History: The State Legislature created the Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) in 1970. At the time it was widely anticipated that MTC would put an end to parochialism and bring a regional perspective to what even back then was recognized as a serious oncoming problem. As set forth in Title 7.1 of the California Government Code, the underlying reason for bringing MTC into existence was simple and to the point. It reads as follows: *"There is hereby created...the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to provide comprehensive regional transportation planning for the region comprised of the City and County of San Francisco and the Counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma."*

But this didn't come even close to happening and as a result the Region has fallen on hard times.

Bay Area Transportation Trends (compared to 1980):



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

Ridership on buses and trains has declined and an ever increasing flood of cars is overwhelming Bay Area roadways. With respect to MTC, people ask: "Does MTC actually do anything or is it concerned only with process? "The answer is that it used to do something. MTC's early years were devoted to patiently and persistently explaining the benefits of regional planning and coordination to skeptical Bay Area municipalities and it was making headway. In those days MTC took its assigned responsibilities seriously. Unfortunately this early commitment to effective regional transportation planning lasted for only a few years, after which things started going downhill.

During the last four decades things have reverted to pretty much to what they were before there was an MTC. Absent any regional leadership, the local jurisdictions have returned to the old practice of vigorously promoting parochial projects, with nary a thought given to the regional planning mandate MTC was directed to follow in 1970.

2. Defective MTC Commissioner Selection Process: The members of the Commission are usually appointed for the wrong reasons. There is no application process. There is no description of responsibilities nor any apparent requirements as to either experience or other qualifications. Perhaps because little attention is paid to the importance of being a MTC Commissioner, there typically is no competition for these positions. Moreover there is no effective oversight on how each County Board of Supervisors or Mayors Conference, or in the case of Oakland, San Francisco, the Mayors, make their selections. In most cases the qualification that seems to count most is the anticipated ability of a prospective Commissioner to obtain MTC money for highway expansion and other pet local projects. So much for regional planning...

3. Wasteful and Counter-Productive MTC Projects: Large, publicly-funded projects that consume billions of scarce transportation dollars should do more than just enrich developers and create construction jobs. In addition they should invigorate local economies and improve life for everyone. Ill-conceived short-sighted projects cause great damage. Here is some of the damage done because MTC failed to do its job:

BART Extension to SFO: 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 20 minutes longer than a trip on a Caltrain extended to the Salesforce Transit Center would take. As a result, ridership on the BART/Millbrae extension has fallen far short of expectations.

MTC presided over the Bay Bridge East Span Debacle: The Loma Prieta Earthquake occurred in 1989. Because of a resulting failure in the existing Cantilever Span seismic upgrading was called for, as it was on other bridges throughout the region. Approximately a decade later, the Bay Bridge Span Oversight Committee, lead by MTC, made a fateful and disastrously unwise choice. Instead of retrofitting the existing cantilever span to meet current seismic standards which would taken 4 or 5 years to complete at a cost of roughly \$1.5 billion it was decided to entirely replace the existing structure with a new bridge featuring an “iconic” self-anchored, suspension span. The replacement alternative took 24 years to complete and cost \$6.8 billion, an overrun of 450%.

Oakland Airport Connector (OAC): When the Federal Transportation Administration refused to back the OAC project, MTC strongly promoted it and diverted Bridge tolls to help pay for it. Passengers used to take a shuttle bus back and forth between the Coliseum BART station and the Airport. The one-way, three-mile bus trip time took 12 minutes and cost \$3. The \$500 million elevated trip now it takes 15 minutes, costs \$6 and requires substantial operating subsidies.

MTC helped push a new Freeway through the Presidio of San Francisco: This project started out as a straightforward seismic upgrade of two seismically unsafe Doyle Drive viaducts at the east end of the Presidio and some repaving for an estimated cost of \$0.42 billion. Once under way the project morphed into a massive new freeway that intrudes heavily on the Presidio and whose final cost exceeded \$2 billion.

MTC strongly supported San Francisco's ill-conceived Central Subway: The cost of this 1.7 mile light rail line was originally set at \$0.647 billion. The final cost will be between \$1.8 billion and \$2.3 billion depending upon how the construction contractor's many outstanding claims against the Owner (SFMTA) are finally resolved. Despite the often repeated mantra that "we will be underground and you won't even know we're there, Central Subway construction has made a complete mess of San Francisco's Chinatown and Union Square areas for over four years. From the outset the project was deceptively sold to unsuspecting politicians and others based upon grossly exaggerated trip time savings, wildly over-estimated ridership projections, and the fantasy that the construction impacts would be minimal. In the draft EIR/EIS released in 2009 it was claimed that the project would cut Muni operating costs by \$23.9 million a year. In 2012 it was quietly acknowledged to the federal government that the project would actually cost Muni and extra \$15.1 million a year, a spread of \$39 million a year.

MTC's misuse of High Speed Rail Connectivity Funds. Led by its Director, MTC was instrumental in the improper diversion of \$61.3 million in HSR "Connectivity" funds to the Central Subway...which does not connect to HSR.

MTC's \$6 billion HOT Lane Program: "HOT lanes" (now called "express lanes") are built to give affluent motorists a way of regularly bypassing highway gridlock. MTC's program adds a new wrinkle. Despite the accepted conclusion of the California Department of Transportation and many other groups that adding to the capacity of freeways invariably produces additional traffic, MTC adopted a uniquely backward-looking approach by including 300 lane-miles of new freeway in its HOT Lane program. MTC's decision to enlarge Bay Area freeways in this manner will inevitably lead to more traffic on all Bay Area roadways, including city streets and arterials already overloaded with traffic.

MTC's Unaccountable Opposition to Dumbarton Rail: Anyone who has driven on the Dumbarton Highway Bridge is aware of the fact that another way of crossing the South Bay is badly needed. Rebuilding the Dumbarton rail bridge is by far the cheapest and most practical option available. This long-needed rail connection would cross the Bay between Union City and Redwood City. By failing to support the project and by diverting Dumbarton funds to other projects, MTC has delayed this vital rail link by at least 25 years.

Shortsighted and Wasteful MTC Headquarters Relocation: Led by its Executive Director, MTC spent \$250 million in Bridge Toll Funds to move its headquarters from the Lake Merritt BART station to lavish new digs located four long city blocks away the Market Street subways.

MTC's Hostile Take-Over of ABAG: Two years ago, MTC became frustrated when ABAG, whose funding passed through MTC hands, asserted its independence from the MTC agenda.

MTC reacted to this “insubordination” by threatening to cut off the funding, thereby forcing ABAG into bankruptcy. Because of fierce opposition from the cities, MTC agreed to consider alternative ways of managing ABAG’s functions but soon reneged on the agreement by putting MTC’s Director in charge of the entire ABAG staff and terminating ABAG’s executive leadership, thereby assuming full control over ABAG operations. This represented a crass power grab with no logical or other justification that remains in effect today.

Regional Measure 3 (RM3): On June 5, 2018 RM3, defined largely by MTC, and destined to raise bridge tolls by \$3, was approved by slightly over half the Bay Area voters. RM3 contained some excellent features, such as the dollars set aside for BART and Muni Metro vehicle replacement and for the extension of Caltrain into downtown San Francisco. Unfortunately it also contained at least two billion dollars worth of useless or in some cases counterproductive pork, with funds carefully spread around for the sole purpose of attracting votes and with little if any consideration given to the long range effect of the expenditures on the Bay Area. In addition, the RM3 bridge toll increases are being improperly treated as fees requiring a 50% vote when, according to the California Constitution Article 13c, they are in fact taxes requiring a 2/3rd vote. The adopted measure remains tied up in litigation.

4. Missed Opportunities: Here are some proposals of great promise that MTC either blocked or killed by inattention.

MTC Abandoned the Altamont HSR Alignment: Today the passenger rail Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) travels at an average speed of 39 miles per hour and consequently takes 2 hours to get from Stockton to San Jose. Had MTC stuck with the originally-recommended Altamont Pass HSR alternative it would have cut billions of dollars from the cost of upgrading ACE. As things stand it appears that despite the need for a fast rail connection between San Joaquin Valley/Tri-Valley area and Silicon Valley, ACE will continue to be patronized by only the most devoted of train riders for the foreseeable future.

MTC Blocked the Return of Passenger Rail Service to the Bay Bridge: In 1998, the voters of Emeryville, Oakland, San Francisco and Alameda passed initiatives by large majorities calling for the return of passenger rail service to the Bay Bridge. MTC reluctantly hired a consultant to examine the proposal but then, in an incredibly short-sighted move, abruptly killed the project the day after the Consultant reported that the plan was “feasible but costly”. Costly compared to what? The question was neither asked nor answered. As a result, instead of a \$6 billion bridge rail line linking the East Bay to downtown San Francisco, the Region is now saddled with the increasing need to provide a \$25 or \$30 billion, additional subaqueous passenger rail service

MTC Failed to Act in response to BART’s Impending Transbay Capacity Crunch: This problem has been recognized and well-publicized for at least the last 4 decades. Yet until last year MTC paid little attention to the problem. As a result the project has just recently entered the early study phase. As a result it unlikely that a second Transbay Tube for passenger rail service will be up and running before 2070. No one knows how the Central Bay Area economy will function during the 45 intervening years between 2025, the year BART is expected to run

out of peak-period transbay carrying-capacity, and 2070.

MTC's Failure to Establish a Regional Bus Operation: There are many parts of the Greater Bay Area that BART can't reach and will probably never reach. For this reason the need for a regional bus service has been talked about at MTC since its inception in 1971. In 2004 the Bay Area Electorate approved Regional Measure 2 to increase the tolls on the Bay Area's seven State-owned bridges in order to provide the funding needed for a number of important projects including Phase I of the long needed and long awaited Regional Bus System. Ignoring the voters' mandate MTC diverted the funds to other uses. There is still no Regional Bus Service.

Examples of MTC Failure to Intervene:

Example 1: To reduce the excessive amount of north-south automobile traffic along the Peninsula and into San Francisco, there has long been a need to extend Caltrain 1.3 miles into the new Salesforce Transit Center in downtown San Francisco. Since the 78-mile long Caltrain line passes through three MTC counties this is clearly a regional project. Yet, in large part because of a lack of interest on the part of MTC, the Caltrain extension project continues to languish.

Example 2: A dozen years ago Caltrain and the California High Speed Rail Authority (CAHSRA) were at odds over how best to operate their two systems jointly and on same set of tracks. Despite the regional nature of the problem, MTC, as it usually does, took a passive, "above the fray" approach, leaving it to the two agencies spend years sorting out their differences. The "blended system" was not agreed upon until 2012.

Example 3: With BART at capacity it is obvious that AC Transit needs to greatly increase its currently anemic transbay ridership. To get this done will take strong regional encouragement and assistance. In part because of MTC's tendency to ignore AC Transit, there is still little evidence of this happening.

5. Reasons for MTC's Dysfunction: What causes MTC to miss the regional planning mark by so much?

a.) Lack of Training and Orientation: As might be expected, Commissioners, selected mainly for their ability to secure MTC funds for local projects, seldom display any real interest or natural aptitude for regional transportation issues. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that incoming Commissioners receive little or no training about regional planning and what it means.

b.) Unrealistic Expectations: Busy local officials, often traveling long distances to MTC meetings, must struggle to become familiar with a vast array of complicated regional situations, often of little interest to their constituencies. This archaic system is neither necessary nor practical.

c.) Managing by Expediency: Unfortunately, the MTC staff leadership, finding itself relatively free of strong and informed regional planning oversight, has long taken advantage of the situation by avoiding the challenges of the long-term needs of the Bay Area in favor of the easier and more comfortable practice of supplying its Commissioners with the funds needed to carry out local projects in exchange for securing everyone's yearly approval of bogus regional plans. So long as everyone got his or her share of the parochial pie no one complained. Lost in the shuffle the bonafide regional transportation planning needed to keep up with a rapidly evolving greater Bay Area.

d.) Insularity: All of this has become far worse than necessary because of Staff's preference of working in secret with very small groups of "stakeholders" while keeping its plans largely to itself until after the key decisions are made and the deals cut. An outreach program that consists of lengthy power point presentations in large meetings, and junior planners standing in front of charts and providing pat answers to valid questions at "open houses" is not outreach in any meaningful sense of the word. To be effective an outreach program must include bonafide two-way communication.

For these reasons and because of MTC's arcane and unnecessarily complicated processes, the Region's "regional transportation planning agency" has become little more than a funding pipeline between State and federal funding sources and Bay Area cities and counties seeking funds for local projects. This charade occurs year after year because so long as everyone gets his or her piece of the pie, no one complains. And it goes without saying that Commissioners beholden to staff for the receipt of local transportation dollars are poorly positioned to adequately oversee the actions of the MTC staff.

In the last 35 years, this defective process has resulted in the tens of billions of local, State and federal dollars that have passed through MTC hands failing to make even a dent in either easing the Bay Area traffic congestion or building up Bay Area transit systems. When it comes to taking responsibility for addressing and resolving major regional problems the MTC staff has been both short-sighted and passive. In an opinion piece last July, the East Bay Times characterized MTC as an agency marked by "**piecemeal construction, pathetic planning and a lack of long-range vision. The agency merely hands out money for one politically popular project after another with little sense of where it will all lead.**"

6. Essential Reforms: Regardless of what changes are made to MTC's and/or ABAG's governance structures, the following MTC reforms are essential if the Region is ever to have effective regional transportation planning:

a.) The qualifications required to be a MTC Commissioner and a detailed description of the selection process should be well-publicized and made available to interested parties at least six months before the filing deadline. Qualified individuals in and out of government should be encouraged to submit written applications to the appropriate Mayors' Conferences and County Boards of Supervisors. The written statements and verbal presentations of each

applicant should be objectively evaluated. Commissioners should be selected carefully, based upon their experience, qualifications and commitment to fulfilling MTC's mission.

b.) Commissioners should be provided with a reasonable salary, and a budget enabling them to hire their own small staffs. To conserve on funds it might be possible for assistants to serve more than one commissioner.

c.) Incoming new MTC commissioners and their staffs should attend and participate in a five-day orientation and training program focused on the regional planning objectives and functions of their new agency. The training should be conducted by qualified trainers under the supervision of an independent outside entity such as the University of California's Department of City and Regional Planning.

d.) Decisions affecting the entire region must necessarily involve all Commissioners. However care should be taken to avoid overloading Commissioners with useless information or giving them an inadequate amount of time and resources to properly prepare themselves for the important decisions they are continually called upon to make.

e.) Each Commissioner should be required to hold two or more public meetings a year in their respective counties for the purpose of explaining their MTC votes and answering questions relative to their MTC responsibilities.

7. Restructuring Needed: Given the above, it is imperative that there be a full-scale discussion among Bay Area cities and counties about the problems identified here, followed by a fundamental restructuring of MTC. While we don't think that the current local and county bodies that appoint MTC Commissioners need to be changed, we do support the above listed "Essential Reforms" and we do think that a fundamental change in the structure of MTC is needed.

As soon as possible, members of the ABAG Executive Board should convene a General Assembly to inform elected officials and members of the public about the implications of the proposed CASA housing program and need for basic changes to MTC. The focus should be on receiving General Assembly feedback as to the cities' expectations and priorities. ABAG Executive Board members who believe that such a regional discussion is important should create a small committee of city managers to set up and arrange the staffing and venue for the General Assembly. Input from the General Assembly is of critical importance in helping to guide the Legislature and the Agencies on these important matters.

There are many possibilities for restructuring regional governance. Here are two that are considered to be viable.

Option One: ABAG should become separate from and independent of MTC, as it was for over 50 years. MTC should be required by State Statute to regularly and consistently fund ABAG by restoring ABAG's \$4million a year planning grant, escalated each year as necessary to keep up with inflation. The ABAG staff should report to an ABAG Executive Director hired by an independent ABAG Board, and under the general direction of the State Legislature ABAG and MTC should work cooperatively together, as do the other Bay Area regional agencies.

Option Two: ABAG had been the Region's Metropolitan Planning Organization prior to the creation of MTC. Under this option, ABAG would be restored to that role, and MTC would become a part of ABAG. This structure would be similar to the role of almost every other Council of Governments in the State and the nation. The ABAG/MTC Board would be more representative of and responsive to the needs of the Region as a whole, as well as to its towns, cities and counties. Organizational budgets and the approval of the scope and content of the regional plan would be approved by ABAG.

In this Section, we have outlined two ways of restructuring MTC and ABAG to achieve a better future. There are others. The main point is that the system as now arranged is not working and needs fundamental change.