

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TRANSIT OPERATOR AND THE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY IN A LARGE METROPOLITAN AREA

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•FEDERAL, state, and local roles in transit planning are still evolving and flexible, and the institutional relationships between levels of government and modes of urban transportation are crucially important factors in the success or failure of regional transportation planning and operations. There are new things happening with these relationships in the San Francisco Bay area under the newly created Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and with the addition of a regional-scale transit agency, BART.

It is impossible to discuss the intergovernmental relationships influencing transit planning, however, without critical and repeated mention of the long-established federal, state, and local relationships that have shaped the highway programs of this country and that have overwhelmingly dominated urban transportation planning and investments in metropolitan regions.

Despite a long history of analytic and institutional efforts and the substantial sums of money spent in the name of urban planning, there exist no workable transportation systems in major metropolitan areas. Plans are held suspect, because of highway biases, by large numbers of citizens, and there are few major transport projects with the necessary combination of assured funding and local political support to resolve the current difficulties of urban areas.

The San Francisco Bay area is perhaps the leading example of an urban region in which planning has failed to achieve local political credibility, has failed to yield workable solutions, and has left a mixed legacy of extensive data and plans that cannot be implemented. The "freeway revolt" is widely credited as having started here, and it continues to have strong impact in delayed or deleted highway and bridge projects. The environmental awareness of the populace has led to innovative institutions and plans for preservation of the San Francisco Bay, the ocean coasts, and other open space resources. Three counties of the area voted some years ago to tax themselves for the support of a major new rail transit system even before federal matching funds were available for such projects. What has happened in the Bay area is happening elsewhere too, resulting in a substantial mismatch between the kinds of transport facilities and services that are locally desired and the kinds that can be delivered by existing federal and state transportation agencies. If this impasse is to be overcome, federal and state relationships with local areas will have to change substantially.

Creation of the MTC as a regional agency with powers to plan and allocate resources for both transit and highway modes represents a new start in the Bay area that may have implications for other metropolitan areas as well.

How are these relationships developing in the Bay area under the legislated powers of the MTC and cooperating agencies? MTC is a special-purpose regional agency, created by the California state legislature to deal with transport matters in the nine Bay area counties. Its enabling legislation dictates that it cooperate for the time being with other regional agencies with related responsibilities for land use planning, air quality, and other specialized matters. Later, it will become absorbed in whatever general-purpose regional agency that might be created to deal with these matters as a whole. It is empowered to plan and set priorities for transport investment, and these

priorities must be adhered to by local and state government. Its planning responsibilities do not stop at the physical planning of transport facilities but go beyond existing practice to recommending legislative changes for the financing and operation of urban transport facilities if such changes are deemed critical to the successful implementation of the MTC's planning efforts. It is not too soon to suspect that they will be.

Many of the major highways of California, both freeways and expressways, have in the past been mandated by state and federal system plans, much as is the practice in other states. Among the innovative powers of MTC is the responsibility to plan for such highways according to regional priorities, unless there is an "overriding state interest" in a particular facility. Because most of the travel on such urban highways is regional, or even local, it is an important power to be returned to a regional jurisdiction. As such, it challenges the existing federal, state, and local relationships for highway planning, priority setting, and financing. These powers have not yet been tested in practice, but the success of this challenge may be the most crucial factor bearing on MTC's effectiveness and the ability of other urban regions to escape the present highway construction impasse. The response of the state legislature to recommendations included in the MTC plan will determine whether MTC will receive enough additional powers and flexibility to become effective.

As far as transit systems are concerned, there too the MTC interrupts established federal, state, and local planning and funding patterns by providing a new level of decision-making between local transit operating agencies and their formerly direct dealings with Washington. But interposing such a regional level of planning and priority setting for transit has advantages as well as disadvantages for the operators themselves. Because there has not been, in California at least, a state role in urban transit that encourages local operating agencies to come together in patterns that make regional sense, each operator has gone it alone within his own, relatively local jurisdiction. But, as new money has become available within recent years, at both the state and federal levels, for transit investment, and with highway solutions breaking down in urban regions, the opportunities for and responsibilities of transit operations are rapidly extending beyond the jurisdictions of local operators. A regional agency with the powers and resources to do system-level transit planning, to influence the integration of operations, and even to set priorities between competing financial claims on state and federal resources has thus become a much needed partner of transit operating agencies in ensuring their collective success in providing regional transit.

In each instance then, with highways and transit, MTC has newly intervened in established federal, state, and local patterns of responsibility to sort out system-level planning priorities and to make resource allocation decisions for each mode within the urban region. If it can go on, with the further cooperation of state and federal governments, to make flexible allocative decisions among highways and transit and to obtain adequate financial resources, MTC will have the ability, theoretically at least, to plan and implement transport facilities responsive to the political desires of its metropolitan region.

Among the unique contributors to MTC's deliberations thus far in seeking to bring about acceptable transportation improvements in the Bay area has been a strong transit planning advocacy. Both the well-established operating transit agencies in San Francisco and the East Bay with their high performance and patronage records and the planning of the promising regional newcomer, BART, have contributed to the region's expectations for what should be possible in terms of good transit service. Their willingness to financially support and plan with the MTC has been invaluable so far.

Traditionally transit operating agencies have not undertaken broadly defined transit-transportation planning efforts, but this is changing, and BART's unique legislative and then electoral mandate in the Bay area to plan for a new regional rail transit system has contributed to a wider awareness. Among the functions that BART was originally intended to serve are both an attraction of commuters away from the private automobile, particularly for access to downtown San Francisco and Oakland, and an influence on the future distribution of economic activity and, hence, land use in the region. Both of these objectives place transit planning in a much broader context than that of the efficient mobility of passengers. The cross relationships between rail system design

and urban location patterns and the relative attractiveness of transit versus highway modes for regional commuter traffic led BART to a variety of regional planning concerns from its earliest days.

Without transit advocacy, such as BART and other systems now developing in the Bay area, decision-makers are not likely to fully recognize transit needs. Already countering such transit interests is the long-established federal-state highway cartel whose acknowledged political powers have led to a preponderance of highway-oriented transport bureaucracies, plans, facilities, and funds. The funding patterns established by these interests for the provision of highway systems have long convinced decision-makers that urban highways are the financially easiest course to follow in programming new regional transport facilities. Even in the Bay area, past transport planning without the influence of such transit advocacy produced a highway plan.

Even now, political realities being what they are, MTC could not be expected to develop a multimodal transport plan without transit advocacy. MTC needs BART and other transit operating agencies to help develop support for the transit elements of its plan. A transit constituency needs to be formed and, indeed, is forming.

Of the several strong and capable transit operating agencies in the Bay area, BART's role is predominately regional. AC Transit, SF Muni, Golden Gate Transportation District, and even the commuter functions of the Southern Pacific Railroad either have a local transport function or serve as a single, specialized commuter system. Not only does BART begin to tie much of the region together with its own service, but it provides an interrelationship among the various local systems so that they can provide comprehensive regional mobility via transit. BART has the potential to extend the backbone of regional-scale transit through much more of the region and to provide the linkages to new local systems that may be created.

BART provides the scale of service that goes beyond local mobility to the region-shaping potentials of transit, therefore being one of several crucial planning determinants of the land use, economic, and environmental characteristics of the future Bay area. This is a heavy planning responsibility if taken seriously and not ignored as subordinate to exclusive mobility concerns but not so crucial to the bulk of local transit operators.

BART's success as a regional system (or integral part of one) depends greatly on the abilities of other local systems to serve feeder and distributor roles to extend the coverage of the system beyond pedestrian or automobile access to its stations. Therefore BART's success, and regional transit's success, depends on the collective success of all transit in the region.

To summarize, while BART is not, and probably should not be, dominant in deliberations of transit system operators (most trips, after all, are still relatively short), it is the operating agency with the greatest need to plan for coordinated operations, construction of future extensions, and regional environmental impacts.

What planning role does BART see for itself, if MTC does become strong and successful? BART will continue project planning in support of MTC's systems planning and in concert with land use and environmental constraints. In the absence of an effective multimodal planning agency at the regional level in the past, it has had to take on systems planning responsibilities as a single function district.

There must be a trade-off, however, if BART is to relinquish systems planning responsibilities; for, until highway agencies are considered as much operating agencies as city builders, until transport resources can truly be allocated among modes, and until the environmental and energy limits of major urban areas are taken quite seriously, the metropolitan transportation planner will serve as a channel between federal and state government and the transit operator for funds already legislated exclusively for transit and as a mediator between competing transit operators desirous of obtaining a larger share of the same funds. In coming years this is not really where the most important decisions will be made. Existing roles must be considered transitional until more meaningful ones emerge from further legislative and popular action.

What are the needed changes? Arbitrary restraints must be taken off transportation finance. The management of highway facilities must be brought back to the region.

With these changes, transit and highway agencies at the local level will take on

parallel characteristics that will allow them to function together as a combined system to be planned and operated for the most effective overall system.

What does this mean? The concept of constructing and maintaining highways but leaving operations open to the free play of individual operators of single vehicles simply does not work anymore in large urban areas, at least not in the congested morning and evening commuting hours. The source of answers to a growing range of urban transport problems seems to be highway agencies both capable and responsible for the disciplined operation of their facilities. Inasmuch as, beyond a certain point, traffic regulation with single-passenger vehicles can do no more, this begins to give multiperson vehicles priorities on these street and highway facilities—not under the exclusive jurisdiction of a transit operator competing with automobiles, but rather under the joint jurisdiction of a traffic movement agency. If this agency is locally and regionally responsive, it can begin to make optimum use of existing facilities and make wise decisions on resource allocation for new facilities and on regulation of existing facilities. This starts to make highway agencies (a) locally responsive, (b) transit oriented, (c) operators as well as builders, and (d) in fact similar in function to the BART rail system. New highway construction retains its characteristic of influencing urban form comparable to BART fixed-rail systems; and the freeway has to be operated in coordination with other services just as BART has to be operated in coordination with other services.

But the present federal, state, and local institutional relationships stand in the way of this concept. They have placed the financing, planning, construction, and maintenance of highways beyond the effective reach of local and regional government, even though the social, environmental, and mobility impacts are largely at the regional or local level. Although the newer pattern of federal support for transit finance is tied more closely to regional or local desires, the institutional mismatch between highway and transit delivery systems at the urban regional level will continue to cause difficulty until state responsibility in the highway field is returned to local and regional government. That would be more in parallel with the evolving transit support framework.

The region-forming aspects of highways at the freeway and expressway scales need to be recognized as an important planning aspect of regional growth and development. To have most of these highway facilities mandated legislatively as parts of state and federal systems of transport connectors takes away much of the power of regions to determine their own future.

Thus, BART is willing to recognize the prime responsibility of MTC to conduct system-level planning, presuming MTC will be able to demonstrate its abilities and powers to do such planning and make it stick—not just for transit but for highways as well.

Such changes can occur. MTC, together with regional land use and environmental protection agencies, should gradually emerge as the system-level planning agency for a truly multimodal regional transport system, leaving highway and transit agencies to do project planning, construction, and operation of facilities within the overall systems plan.

But MTC will fail in its charge without fundamental changes in existing financing and institutional arrangements. These changes must come at the federal and state levels. Let's hope that this discussion has demonstrated the case for these state and federal actions. The San Francisco Bay area is prepared to uphold its part of the responsibility.