

Building Consensus for Light Rail: A Tale of Two Cities

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This paper summarizes the experiences of San Diego and Sacramento with light rail transit projects from inception to implementation. Differences and similarities in building a consensus for light rail in the communities and among official, decisionmaking bodies are described and contrasted. Public officials in San Diego became dissatisfied with the rail development approaches taken by planners and established a new agency and provided special funding for transit system development. The new agency accelerated the planning process and, at the same time, worked to build consensus for light rail among local officials and the public at large. Interest in light rail transit for Sacramento began with a group of citizens who wanted to improve transportation facilities and reduce the negative environmental impacts of automobile use and freeway construction. For 8 years they used a "grass roots" approach to arouse public interest and to build a pro-LRT consensus among the region's public decisionmaking bodies. No professional staff was committed to light rail during the first 5 years of this effort.

San Diego's 16-mile light rail line opened in July 1981 after an intensive 6-year effort by its proponents. This was an incredibly short development process for a fixed guideway transit system, made possible mainly by adherence to the following "principles":

- Reliance on proven, off-the-shelf technology;
- Development on an incremental basis that allowed early use of available resources and provided for upgrading when necessary; and
- Use of existing rights-of-way where possible.

Use of these principles and avoidance of federal construction grants allowed a development pace that helped to generate community consensus for the project. LRT quickly began to look like something that was actually going to happen; it created a bandwagon effect that galvanized community leadership to support LRT. With the formation of the Metropolitan Transit Development Board in 1976, a full-time professional staff was created to get the project built.

In Sacramento it took longer for elected officials to get interested in light rail. A pro-transit citizen's group—the Modern Transit Society (MTS)—was formed in February 1975, and the first elected official—a city councilman—was persuaded by them that LRT was advantageous later that year. LRT was included in formal alternatives studies over the next 4 years, but it was not until these were concluded, in 1981, that a majority of elected officials were convinced of LRT's feasibility. No professional staff was engaged in the LRT effort until 1979 and it was only one individual.

The example set by San Diego was of great assistance in Sacramento. Soon after professional staff was hired, policymakers approved essentially the same principles noted above, which helped focus debate in Sacramento and allowed clearly unworkable options (e.g., full rapid transit, monorails, and people movers) to be cast aside—a step fully supported by the MTS.

Essentially, the facilities now operating in San Diego and being engineered for Sacramento have much in common. The development of consensus for their construction, however, has been quite distinct in each case. Influential public officials provided the nucleus of support in San Diego; while in Sacramento, dedicated citizens worked for years to build consensus for LRT.

THE SAN DIEGO EXPERIENCE

In San Diego, interest in any alternative to the automobile was limited until the 1973-1974 gasoline shortage. However, the passage of Proposition 5 in June 1974 provided the real incentive to plan a fixed guideway system, since the San Diego legislation was unique in that it "banked" the diversion funds for a 5-year period.

The ensuing rush to fixed guideway planning in San Diego encompassed studies of a multi-billion-dollar, heavy rail proposal (local COG); an extensive, expensive street rail proposal (county); and an exotic, elevated people mover (city). None of these attained a high degree of community acceptance, but each of the studies identified common, high-capacity corridors and focused local attention on the need to begin to develop an alternative.

The creation of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB) consolidated responsibility for transit development, transit planning, and allocation of all transit funds in the southern portion of San Diego County in a single agency. The agency was not required to assume day-to-day responsibility for operating existing transit providers. The policy board selected was composed of local elected officials and one member appointed by the Governor of California.

The MTDB policy board's early, well-known skepticism of any form of rail transit was probably an accurate reflection of the attitude of most elected officials in San Diego County. In retrospect, it helped MTDB's credibility in the community, since any proposed solution first had to overcome that attitude. It also led to the establishment of a small but highly motivated staff, supplemented when required by loan staff from the city, the county, Caltrans, and the California Public Utilities Commission. This loan staff, by ensuring continuous monitoring and input, helped eliminate interagency planning and construction conflicts.

Shortly after its formation, the MTDB policy board adopted the "principles" previously mentioned to help weed out, at an early stage, alternatives unsuitable for San Diego. These principles were understood so well by the community that they lent credibility to alternatives that survived their test. An unanticipated benefit of the principle process was the virtual elimination of additional, unnecessary criteria when an acceptable solution was within reach.

Another early policy decision—to avoid any attempt to seek federal funds—was initially regarded as an impossible hurdle but did much to ensure the success of the planning effort. The decision to "go it alone" was very popular in the community; it set an early and absolute budget ceiling that dictated planning for a simple solution—one that could be achieved within that absolute budget. Light rail transit was the only alternative able to meet this stringent criterion.

Generally, corridor selection was a relatively easy task, since it was really little more than a consolidation and verification of work previously performed to support earlier studies. To identify and adopt an initial segment was much more difficult, and conflicting recommendations were made to the policy board by the consulting engineer (Bechtel) and the MTDB staff. The staff recommendation prevailed and, while generally undesirable, the conflict and its resolution did much to establish the credibility of the MTDB staff with the public and concerned agencies.

The selection of LRT resulted from the Board's principles and the established budget ceiling. However, as those were being developed, the Board undertook two study tours that dramatically increased its understanding of what

transit could do in the community. The first was a 1-week tour of North American transit operations, and that was followed by a 1-week European tour. These tours resulted in the formal adoption of the LRT mode, and a series of formal, public Board workshops led to the adoption of most of the design elements. The Board's enthusiasm and their awareness that a project might be proven feasible also resulted. This was a radical and welcome departure from their earlier skepticism and was a turning point in the "sale" of the concept to elected officials.

Perhaps the factor that most influenced final acceptance and approval of the LRT system was an attempt by the Southern Pacific Company to abandon its 120-mile San Diego and Arizona Eastern (SD and AE) branch operation. This branch reached San Diego from the Southern Pacific main-line in El Centro through the mountains, dropped into Mexico to serve Tecate and Tijuana, then reentered the United States to connect with Santa Fe and serve cities in the eastern San Diego region. This line had been severely damaged by a storm and did not generate sufficient revenue to warrant reconstruction.

The MTDB decision to acquire and contract to operate the SD and AE in a joint mode (freight and light rail) received significant local support and provided an in-place right-of-way in the adopted first corridor. The shift to a joint use design concept was relatively simple, and although some expressed concern about the adoption of this dual use, the subsequent success of both the freight and transit operations has confirmed the wisdom of that decision.

Final adoption of the plan by the San Diego City Council followed development of its early, unanimous support by every organized group in the community. Before seeking council approval, most major businesses, the Navy, the Coastal Zoning Commission, all environmental groups, the Port District, service clubs, and the League of Women Voters had endorsed the proposal. Despite this overwhelming support, the initial hearing before the council ended with a decision deferred pending an actual contract to acquire the SD and AE at the stipulated price and the legislature's agreement to advance Proposition 5 funds.

The contract with Southern Pacific was achieved by the policy board's direct involvement in final negotiations; the necessary legislative changes were accomplished by Senator James R. Mills and Assemblyman Waddie Deddah after outstanding efforts; and the city council finally approved the project.

Within 90 days of final approval, fixed price contracts were let for purchase of the SD and AE, rails, cars, ties, special track work, and final engineering. While this was "after-the-fact," it indicates the absolute necessity to carry preliminary engineering to the point where contracts can be achieved quickly, given an absolute budget ceiling. It is why the San Diego project was completed within budget and on schedule.

THE SACRAMENTO EXPERIENCE

Sacramento's first interest in rail transit was expressed in 1973, when the long-term possibility of extending BART all the way from the Bay Area was mentioned briefly in the Transportation Element of the Sacramento County General Plan.

By 1974, growing concern over urban sprawl and its attendant problems led to protests against building more freeways. Sacramento had a basic freeway system in place by this time. The County Board of Supervisors bowed to citizen pressure in December and voted to drop several state freeway routes scheduled to be built in suburban northeast Sacramento County. This action followed two memorable hearings dominated by anti-freeway forces—the first attended by 400 people, the second by 600. The battle was waged by a coalition of community groups, including the ad hoc Carmichael Citizens' Advisory Committee, assisted by the Environmental Council of Sacramento (ECOS) and other groups who formed the ECOS Trans-

portation Committee. This nucleus grew into the Modern Transit Society (MTS).

A Sacramento branch of MTS was formed in February 1975. It worked to improve public transit—bus as well as rail. The various studies and other events they undertook are listed in Table 1.

Disposal of Northeast Freeway Rights-of-Way

In May 1975, the County Board of Supervisors appointed the North-East Transportation Task Force (NETTF), a group that included representatives of ECOS, regional and local chambers of commerce, the League of Women Voters, Regional Transit, the Central City Study Committee, labor unions, and others. The group's function was to advise the Supervisors on disposition of the abandoned route 143 and 244 rights-of-way. The Sacramento Regional Area Planning Commission (SRAPC) provided staff; the NETTF selected its own consultant. The Northeast Area Transportation Study, a major review of transportation needs in the northeast area, was the result. The area contains about half the entire metropolitan area population.

The NETTF's recommendation to the Board of Supervisors in 1976 contained several points: no major transportation use of the 143 and 244 rights-of-way; their sale to private interests; no American River bridge on the 143 right-of-way; regional priority to improve public transit and establish, with the City of Sacramento, a joint citizens' committee to determine the feasibility of developing light rail transit with Interstate Transfer dollars from the Interstate 80 Bypass. Throughout this effort, MTS members were active on the NETTF. The coalition of community groups that defeated the freeways continued to function and to work for better transit.

Historic Trolley

In 1975, two MTS members attended the first National Conference on Light Rail Transit, one as an "official" delegate of the NETTF. MTS used the knowledge acquired at the conference to develop the first MTS rail proposal for Sacramento—a "bare bones," historic trolley loop in the downtown area—that could be expanded and upgraded to modern LRT and extended, as needed, to serve suburban areas in the northeast and Folsom corridors. This idea was advocated in an MTS paper, "Downtown Historic Trolley Loop and Initial Light Rail Service in Sacramento."

In 1975, City Councilman Lloyd Connelly became the first elected official in the region to take active interest in what has become light rail. A year later a majority of council members voted to match SRAPC funds needed for a formal feasibility study of the historic trolley concept.

This effort, the "Historic Trolley—Sacramento; Feasibility Study," was completed by Wilbur Smith and Associates in 1977. It determined that the trolley would be feasible.

The Interstate 80 Bypass

One proposed freeway, the Interstate 80 (I-80) Bypass, remained on the planners' maps. This was planned in the mid-1960s to relieve congestion on the existing Route 80, Sacramento's original freeway, built shortly after World War II. Caltrans recommended the Bypass because it would be cheaper to build it than to reconstruct and widen Route 80. Development along the freeway made land acquisition costs prohibitive.

The I-80 Bypass was not completed by 1969 and was therefore subject to the National Environmental Policy Act. The required environmental impact statement was delayed during the 1970s; in 1976, the NETTF pushed for a restudy of the I-80 Bypass. This effort ran from 1977 to 1979 and evaluated 11 alternatives, including completion of the I-80 Bypass, reconstruction of Route 80, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, and light rail transit. Numerous public workshops were held in neighborhoods along the I-80 By-

Table 1. Key Dates Leading to Adoption of Transit.

Year	Event
1974	Deletion of Planned Northeast Sacramento free-ways (Routes 65, 143, and 244) by Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
1975	Formation of Modern Transit Society (MTS) and publication of its proposal for historic trolley in downtown as basis for initial LRT system
1976	Northeast Area Transportation Study (NEATS), leading to call for sale of freeway 143 and 244 rights-of-way and development of LRT in the Interstate 80 corridor
1976	Passage of referendum in Sacramento County allowing up to 25 percent of county's state highway funds to be spent on fixed guideway transit projects (local implementation of Article XIX of California Constitution)
1977	Historic Trolley—Sacramento, Feasibility Study
1977	Passage of SB 885, amending the Regional Transit District Act to allow RT to seek a sales tax increase
1978	Start of Interstate 80 Multi-Modal Corridor Study reevaluating I-80 Bypass freeway
1978	Completion of Sacramento Multi-Destination Transit System report, setting transit development principles—artery and local access routes linked through timed transfers at transit centers
1978	Decision to undertake Folsom corridor light rail study, negotiated by Modern Transit Society (MTS) with public agency staffs
1979	Adoption of Regional Transit General Plan calling for restructuring of RT system around artery routes, timed transfer transit centers, and local access routes
1979	Completion of I-80 Multi-Modal Corridor Study and decision by Sacramento City Council to recommend withdrawal of the I-80 Bypass freeway from the Interstate system
1979	Defeat of Measure C by Sacramento County voters (44 percent in favor), which would have added ¼ percent to sales tax for transit
1980	Completion of Folsom Corridor Rail Feasibility Study determining feasibility of LRT and its desirability compared to other options
1980	Start of Northeast Sacramento Alternatives Analysis
1981	Completion of Northeast Sacramento Alternatives Analysis and selection of a 19-mile light rail transit line extending through both the I-80 and Folsom corridors as the locally preferred alternative

pass. MTS members attended every meeting, responded to antirail and antitransit statements, and kept a close watch on the project staff planners who were, at best, skeptical. The MTS and members of other community organizations (League of Women Voters, Lung Association, ECOS, etc.) also attended every meeting of the policy committee overseeing the study and effectively lobbied its members. The policy committee (city council members, county supervisors, RT board members, and a Caltrans official) voted in September 1979 to recommend (1) withdrawing the I-80 Bypass from the Interstate system and (2) making a more detailed evaluation of the HOV and LRT concepts in a Phase II alternatives analysis. The recommendations were adopted by the Sacramento City Council and approved by the Governor of California and the United States Secretary of Transportation.

Transit System Development and Funding

Expanded bus service from the City of Sacramento into Sacramento County began in 1973, when the Sacramento Regional Transit District (RT) was formed. The transit fleet increased from 120 to 225 buses and was funded by the Transit Development Act passed by the state in 1971. Rapid growth in the region continued, and a further doubling of the bus fleet was envisioned. To obtain funding for it, at the end of 1976 a Transit Financing Task Force recommended an increase within the county of the state sales tax. SB 885, authorizing RT to seek such a tax, was passed by the state legislature in 1977.

At the same time, RT and SRAPC began the work that led to adoption of a general plan for RT's further development. In February 1978, RT appointed a Citizens General Plan Advisory Committee, and this group introduced and advocated the timed transfer principle, first suggested by MTS in a 1976 newsletter. This idea was at first resisted by RT staff, but new members of RT's planning department embraced the concept.

The first transit center began operating at Florin Mall in 1979, featured revised bus routes, and included a limited stop express line to downtown Sacramento. The changes have proved successful; connection reliability is 98 percent. This success has established the credibility of the MTS.

Transit development plans in Sacramento received a setback in November 1979 with the defeat of local ballot Measure C, which sought approval of the 0.25 percent local sales tax authorized by SB 885 in 1977. Although 44 percent of the voters favored the tax, it lacked the two-thirds majority required by Proposition 13, passed in 1978. The measure's defeat has left Sacramento with limited transit operating dollars. Such a fast growing metropolitan area requires increased transit capacity and must therefore increase the productivity of its current resources. The RT solution is the restructuring of the current system as outlined in the general plan but without the planned expansion of neighborhood bus routes. The limited stop express routes upon which downtown traffic planning is being concentrated must operate with the aid of maximum transit technology.

The entitlement that resulted from withdrawal of the I-80 Bypass freeway gives the region the capability to make the major capital investment in transit that will put this more efficient technology in place on the Northeast Sacramento arterial routes. It was with this background that the Phase II alternatives analysis was begun in 1980, although it had a year 2000 planning horizon. It was assumed that, by then, transit service could be doubled.

Folsom Corridor Study

At the time the Phase II work in the I-80 corridor was starting, a state-supported study in the Folsom corridor was concluding. This work, the "Folsom Corridor Rail Transit Feasibility Study," found that LRT, with feeder

buses and park-and-ride, would be technically feasible and more workable in the area east of Sacramento than other options studied (HOV lanes and freeway widening). It also found that Folsom corridor facilities had been relieving congestion in the I-80 corridor; therefore, further studies should evaluate both corridors simultaneously.

MTS first suggested an LRT line to California State University, Sacramento, in its 1975 paper (above). In 1978, the Director of Caltrans, Adriana Gianturco, endorsed the idea in a letter to Sacramento Mayor Phil Isenberg. Gianturco agreed with Councilman Connelly and the MTS that the historic trolley idea, updated to modern light rail transit, should be considered and extended beyond the downtown area to California State University (about 4.5 miles) and beyond.

This study started in April 1979. A Policy Advisory Committee was appointed by RT to oversee the Folsom corridor work. It was chaired by Connelly and included representatives from the City Council, County Supervisors, RT Board, and Caltrans. An MTS member also was appointed to the study's Technical Advisory Committee.

Northeast Sacramento Phase II Alternatives Analysis

Early in 1980, RT's rail planner was selected to manage the Phase II alternatives analysis for Northeast Sacramento and loaned to SRAPC for that purpose. The start of the analysis overlapped the Folsom corridor study; because of the corridor's demonstrated value in relieving congestion in the I-80 area, it was decided to expand the Phase II study to include both the I-80 and Folsom corridors.

This expansion was a key topic in several neighborhood workshops held during project "scoping". MTS continued to monitor the study and, as it neared completion, began to plan a major campaign to build broad support for LRT.

This effort received a substantial boost from the new RT general manager, who had been in charge of the San

Diego LRT project. Faced with limited operating resources and growing transit needs in an era of inflation, he endorsed the need for higher transit productivity and convinced a new RT board to support development of efficient LRT trunks in Northeast Sacramento. Working with the MTS, a Community Task Force for LRT set out to build community consensus for the project, and by the time the Northeast Sacramento Draft Environmental Impact Statement was circulated (April-June 1981), their campaign was successful. The community was nearly unanimous that LRT should be selected and that it should be built in both the I-80 and Folsom corridors as a through route. The decision received 10 of 11 votes from the study's policy committee, 8 of 9 from the City Council, and unanimous votes from the RT Board and the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG, formerly SRAPC). Workshops and public hearings were attended by MTS members and representatives of other community organizations. A high point occurred when the Sacramento Board of Realtors president followed a Sierra Club representative and commented that it was probably the first time the two organizations had agreed on an issue. Another high point was the Central Labor Council speaker's self-introduction as representing "the 80,000 organized workers in greater Sacramento". Resolutions and letters of support for LRT were received from 46 community organizations, and 5,000 area residents signed a petition circulated by the MTS.

Since the spring 1981 decision, additional planning has been under way to set the final alignment in neighborhoods where community concerns needed to be addressed. Sacramento congressmen have worked to ensure funding for project engineering during 1982, and a joint powers authority, including the city, county, RT, and Caltrans, has been formed to design and build the project. The community was pulling together again to convince UMTA that authorization to begin LRT preliminary engineering should be granted.

LRT Development: State Perspective

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San Diego has received considerable attention for its imaginative deployment of light rail transit technology and for its decision to eschew federal funds and rely on state and local revenues to meet the capital and operating requirements of the LRT system. California's commitment to funding urban transportation encouraged the Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB) to pursue a policy of fiscal independence. Equally important was the legislature's assignment of powers and responsibilities to MTDB. A product of state and local politics, MTDB represented a rejection of the nationalization of urban transportation policy of the past 20 years. Indeed, MTDB's success raised questions about the wisdom of a national policy that sought to bypass state governments in its efforts to achieve a national urban transportation policy and ignored the fiscal capability of state governments to support programs and moderate conflicts, and the state's authority to constitute local agencies. MTDB may serve as a model for a reformed national urban transportation policy that would give priority to state governments in urban transportation policy formulation and not seek to specify organizational arrangements for carrying out urban transportation planning. This paper describes the role of California's state government in the evolution of MTDB and its LRT system. It concludes with some remarks regarding federalism.

In 1971, California's Governor Reagan signed the Transportation Development Act (TDA) which established a transit funding program that has since produced \$2.1 billion for funding and operating public transit in the state. The program sets aside 0.25 percent of sales tax revenues and permits the funds in urban areas of the state to be used for public transit; in the nonurban areas funds may be used either for transit or for local streets and roads. Although the state legislature establishes guidelines, the revenues are identified as local and are returned to the county of origin for allocation. The program offers certainty of funds and opportunities to develop transit programs. The funds are allocated by regional transportation agencies (in federal parlance, MPOs).

Another funding decision was a constitutional amendment approved in June 1974 that permits gasoline tax revenues, previously constitutionally reserved for highway construction, to be used to construct rail transit systems but not to purchase rolling stock or subsidize operations. The amendment requires a local election be held to authorize a county to participate in the program. Nine counties, including San Diego, have made that decision. A state statute implements the amendment and allows the equivalent of up to 25 percent of the state highway revenues spent in a county to be allocated for guideway construction.