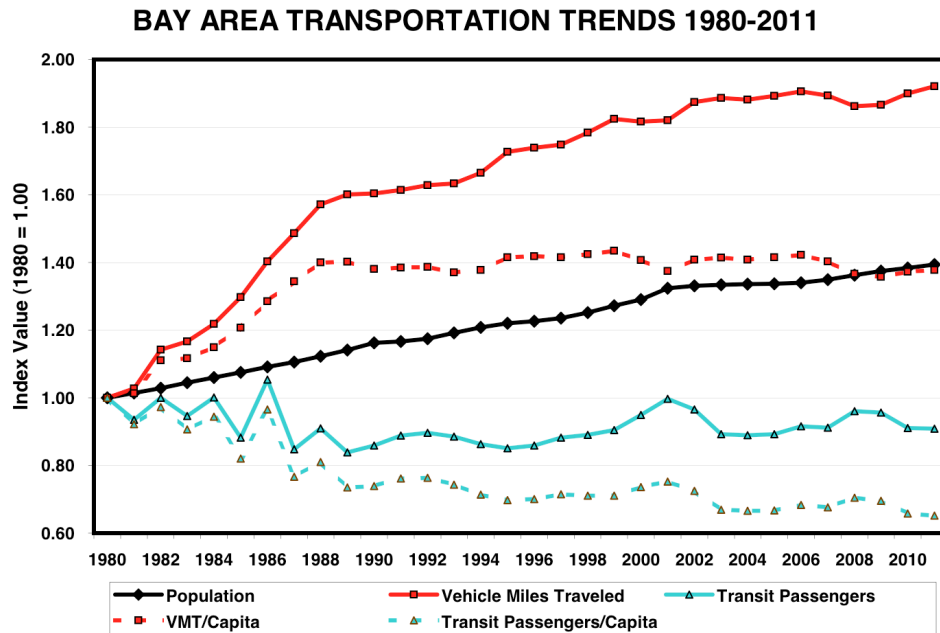


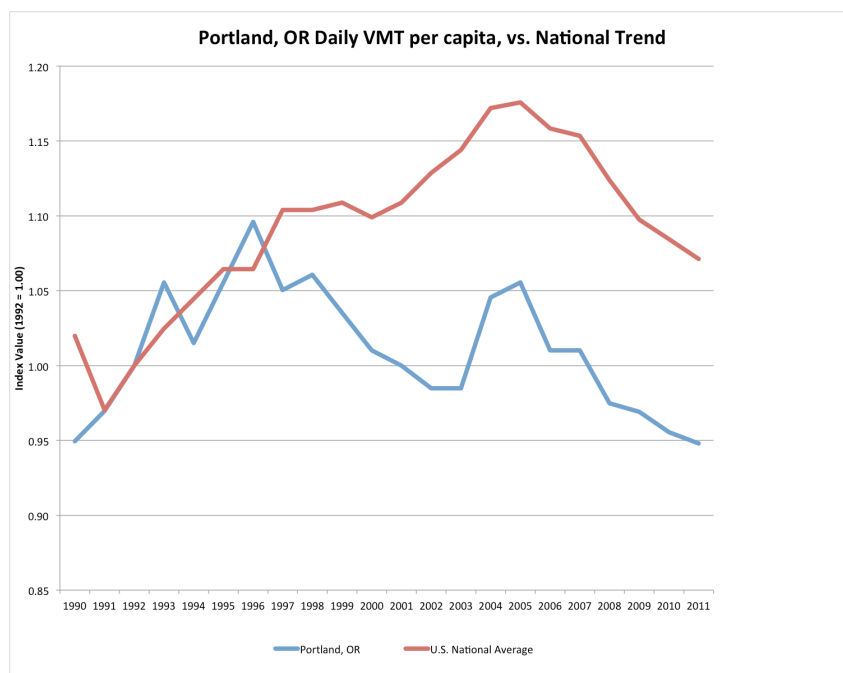
Case Study: Politics Trumps Outcomes at MTC

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission, MTC, serves as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Bay Area. Its performance offers a perfect example of what not to do in implementing the Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program, TIRCP. MTC has poured many billions of dollars into transit, only to see a decline in transit ridership over the past 30 years, both in absolute and per capita terms. The trend for VMT per capita has remained stagnant.



Data from MTC's *Statistical Summary of Bay Area Transit Operators* and *Bay Area Census* reports

In contrast, Portland was able to change its trend, substantially lowering its VMT per capita, presumably by thoughtful capital allocation and successful policies:



(1992 was chosen as the base year for comparison, because the daily VMT per capita was very similar: 19.80 for Portland and 20.20 nationally.) Note that on the chart above, Portland significantly out-performed the national average. Portland introduced policy innovations in the early 1990s, which, together with competent implementation, makes it the successful model STA needs to emulate.

MTC considers itself one of the nation's leading metropolitan planning organizations, and possibly the most advanced of them all. In 2001, despite a 30% population increase since 1982, TRANSDEF noted that Bay Area regional transit ridership had increased less than 1% (which constituted more than a 21% per capita decrease in ridership!). We initiated a lawsuit to enforce the provisions of TCM 2, a federal Clean Air Act commitment MTC had made to increase regional transit ridership by 15% over 1982 levels. We won two excellent trial court decisions and an attorney's fee of \$1.1 million, which were unfortunately overturned by a conservative Ninth Circuit panel.

Ten years after the TCM 2 litigation, after a 38% increase in Bay Area population over 1980 levels, transit ridership is now even lower than 1982. After spending many billions of dollars on BART extensions and highway widenings, regional transit ridership is an astonishing 31% lower on a per capita basis. If the point of the TIRCP is to achieve outcomes of increased transit ridership and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, STA would be well advised to not use MTC as a model.

The MTC Project Selection Process

The addition of large projects to the long-range regional plan is typically the result of grandstanding by a political leader, followed by consultant work to ostensibly justify the expenditure. The BART extension to San Jose had been considered out of reach for the area, when San Jose Mayor Gonzales made a name for himself by becoming its champion.

An all-too-familiar example of the MTC project selection process: San Francisco Willie Brown promised a subway to a Chinatown political leader that had helped him in a tough election. Despite Muni's very large capital needs to achieve a State of Good Repair, San Francisco made the Central Subway its top priority. MTC unblinkingly put the project into its long-range plan, and assisted in getting a Full-Funding Grant Agreement for \$942 million, with another \$62 million in HSR connectivity funds. Ironically, the project will disconnect transit riders on the Third Street line from the Muni Market Street tunnel, forcing a long walk to make the connection. The project underwent a series of scope changes as the cost escalated. Platform lengths were shortened in a penny wise--pound-foolish attempt to reduce costs.

Transit advocates were very opposed to the project. (See SaveMuni.com for details.) They fully agreed that Chinatown needed much better transit. However, they recognized that a surface transit solution would be far more beneficial, with a dramatically lower price tag. The City, however, had no stomach for the political firestorm that would come from reconfiguring parking to make space for bus lanes. Advocates recognized that the deep tunnel approach would require very long escalator rides, which would eliminate any travel time advantage gained by avoiding surface traffic. As project cost estimates doubled, neither MTC nor SFMTA reevaluated the merits of the project.

The BART extension to San Francisco International Airport, which MTC had made the region's top priority, still has not achieved the ridership that was projected for it twenty years ago. Its cost more than doubled, too. MTC is committed to pursuing BART extensions because of their political popularity, no matter how absurd their cost. TRANSDEF views this as a rejection of the basic principles of planning, which call for identifying the problem and serving it in the most cost-effective manner possible. Making matters far worse, the extensions have failed to achieve ridership justifying the many billions of dollars spent.

A striking characteristic of MTC's project selection process is its ratchet-like inflexibility. Once a project has become a "committed project" by being added to the plan, that decision is never revisited, even when project scope changes. (See discussion of Oakland Airport Connector on page 3 of our comment letter.) This is a clear expression of MTC's priorities in project selection: what matters is upholding the political deal. The outcome is secondary--or tertiary.

This is why MTC's performance is so miserable. The agency is not focused on achieving results. This is also why MTC never looks back to evaluate its performance: it frankly isn't interested. It values its performance in political terms, not in transportation terms. While MTC makes a great show of evaluating performance measures, these evaluations are not actually used to screen out low-benefit projects.

Rather than regional planning, MTC sees its primary function as stapling together the wish lists of local jurisdictions and brokering deals. Even at this late date, MTC has still not realized that auto-dominated local priorities do not scale up to make a regional plan that can provide peak hour mobility. The very high auto mode share simply cannot be supported during peak periods. Congestion keeps getting worse, with an obvious trend line: gridlock straight ahead!

This leaves no hope for a better future. MTC refuses to recognize that its solutions, which are highway-oriented, aren't working and can't work in the future. MTC refuses to commit to a transit-first future. MTC's most expensive projects are adding HOT lanes to Bay Area highways, in obvious disregard of the last three items on this list of project selection factors--each of which plays only a minor role, or none at all, at MTC:

- a strategy of regionalism
- cost-effectiveness
- mode-shift
- GHG emissions reductions
- VMT reductions

The Bay Area has already done the experiment with politically driven projects supported by fanciful consultant projections. While we're not saying the agency is corrupt, the public is clearly getting negative value from the funds it entrusts with MTC. Is STA willing to move beyond the status quo to get results? If not, the outcomes are likely to look like MTC's.