

TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND

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July 24, 2003

Steve Kinsey, Chair
Marin County CMA
Marin County Civic Center
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Marin's Transportation Sales Tax Planning

Dear Steve:

TRANSDEF believes the CMA's development of a sales tax expenditure plan has lost its direction. Although the sales tax is being viewed as the way to improve Marin's transportation conditions, we think that goal has been quietly and perhaps unconsciously replaced by efforts to generate revenue for currently underfunded programs, a very different outcome. We are concerned that the proceeds of a sales tax are likely to be squandered without achieving much in the way of mobility results, unless the plan is based on a deeper analysis of Marin's problems.

Causes of Congestion

- 1). As long as an overwhelming percentage of the population lives and works in low density suburban locations, people will want to drive to their destination. The dispersion of potential origins and destinations means that convenient public transit service will not be economically feasible, due to the absence of concentrations of potential riders.

- 2). The wealth of Marin County means that a large majority of residents are able to afford their own personal vehicles, leading to an expectation of door-to-door convenience.

Strategies

a). Alternatives to Driving, on Separate Rights-of-Way

Given the widespread prevalence of personal autos, the ability to pay for them, and the low density land use, it should be clear that no road-based strategy will ever be able to keep up with the demand for road space. Financial reality, the lack of right-of-way for wider roads, and the unacceptable environmental impacts of new road projects doom this approach to failure. It is widely recognized that "we cannot build our way out of congestion." The key to a strategy of improving mobility needs to be providing alterna-

tives to the personal auto. Drivers will divert to alternative modes that are convenient and reliable when congestion is too aggravating, or parking too difficult. For the most part, that means these alternative modes need to function well despite the congestion of the road system. That implies separate rights-of-way, inherent in the bike, pedestrian and rail systems. Similarly, the local bus proposals need to consider the costs and benefits of signal priority, queue jumping, and HOV lanes on local roads.

b). Connect Activity Centers

Near-universal auto ownership means that transit service will continue to be a niche market, at least until global petroleum supplies decline significantly (or developing economies cause a dramatic rise in oil consumption, leading to much higher prices). The foundation principle should be frequent service between nodes of concentrated activity—downtowns, major employment and commercial centers—where the people are. This nodal focus is an entirely different way of life from the spatial dispersion of suburbia, in which individuals travel from one location to another, alone, in private vehicles. Where people are sufficiently concentrated, either in activity centers or along corridors, it becomes economically feasible to transport them conveniently in public vehicles. Frequent transit use is part of life in urban areas, resulting in a significantly decreased per capita auto trip generation rate. A further reduction in auto trip generation comes from the nearby availability of many daily needs via walking and bicycling. A transit system based on serving these activity centers will encourage appropriate Smart Growth land use. This is consistent with the Smart Growth strategy, which follows below. Access to the activity centers would be by walking, bicycling or proximity--mixed use commercial areas containing residential units.

c). Smart Growth for Future Development

Whatever limited growth does occur in Marin, it should be of the Smart Growth variety. This would reduce or cap the growth in congestion caused by Marin-based autos. An optimal focus from the traffic standpoint would be on developing activity centers to employ existing Marin residents. Economic analyses are needed to determine what incentives are needed to make mixed use TOD happen.

d). Smart Growth Planning Agreements

Part of the Smart Growth strategy needs to be agreements between SMART and the cities along the right-of-way to make sure that appropriately dense land use investments are encouraged around transit stops.

e). Smart Growth Interjurisdictional Planning

A further part of the Smart Growth strategy should be an effort on behalf of all Marin and Sonoma jurisdictions to balance the creation of new jobs with the pool of housing affordable to the income level created by those jobs. Marin's Countywide Plan predicts strong job creation with little affordable housing for those jobs. The Commercial

Jobs/Housing linkage fee in each of the counties will be a step in the right direction. However, more policy level effort to balance jobs and housing on a county level is needed, because imbalance is key to intercounty trip generation. The Regional Agencies Smart Growth Strategies process will hopefully develop further incentives and resources that would assist Marin's jurisdictions in increasing the affordable housing stock. A significant principle coming out of the jobs/housing issue is that Marin and Sonoma should not be building additional highway capacity to transfer additional workers between them. With all the concern on highway congestion, the focus needs to be on generating transit trips to work, because widening 101 between Novato and Petaluma will merely increase the congestion in Marin, by bringing more traffic south.

f). Demand Management

A key strategy to encourage alternatives to the single occupant vehicle is TDM, transportation demand management. It is potentially inexpensive to the public if employers are encouraged to offer employees cash or transit passes in lieu of free parking. This 'parking cash out' could incentivize double digit mode shifts. The high cost of land in Marin would incentivize employers to offer the program, if they are able to make economic use of newly-surplus parking area.

Conclusions

Due to both the overwhelming size of Marin's transportation problem and the small size of the sales tax proceeds, delivering a significant result for residents will require disciplined and highly strategic investment. Rather than just dividing up the money, we need to first determine where we need to go. By concentrating on the strategies identified above, including low-cost but politically challenging interjurisdictional planning, the County is likely to achieve far more satisfactory results. Success will require reliance on these Adopted Planning Principles from the Vision:

- a) Make difficult choices on how many and which projects to include in plan.
- b) Refine projects to eliminate any unnecessary duplications between modes.

TRANSDEF appreciates this opportunity to offer its thoughts on Marin County's transportation problems. We would be pleased to answer any questions about the comments raised here. Please contact us at the address above.

Sincerely,

David Schonbrunn,
President