

Testimony to MTC on Merger--12/4/15

I'm David Schonbrunn from TRANSDEF. I speak from 20+ years of experience with Bay Area regional governance and am very familiar with its strengths and weaknesses.

If the purpose of this study is to actually arrive at a point where merger could happen, the proposed scope of work is inadequate. It won't get you there, because it skirts around the central issue that caused previous merger efforts to fail: who gets to control hundreds of billions of dollars flowing through the agency.

Unless you are willing to forthrightly speak about power, you make it clear to everyone that this study is a charade and that you have no intention of proceeding with a friendly merger.

These agencies are historical accidents. They were never designed to work at the level of comprehensiveness that is now so obviously needed.

This is the time to throw away past structures. We need to design the governance to fit the challenges of today, and especially, tomorrow. Governance should aim at optimal outcomes for residents of the region.

The Bay Area is larger than many states, and deserves governance that is more than an afterthought. In accordance with that comprehensive scope, it would be appropriate to bring BCDC and the Air District into the eventual governance structure.

Many of you probably see merger as primarily about you and your seat. However, there may be another perspective...

I know it may be naive of me to say this, but the one interest group that gets lost in this merger process is the public. The public has a deep interest in thoughtful comprehensive governance--governance that can make an actual difference in their lives.

Because the decisions of a new regional government will have profound effects on the lives of millions, the policy makers need to be accountable to the public. Appointing commissioners is no longer good enough.

Appointees that have multiple public agency responsibilities, as well as full-time jobs, simply do not have the bandwidth to offer the depth of policy direction now required. That lack of bandwidth forces Board members to default to rubber stamping the staff.

I see the new commission seats as serious, full-time policy making jobs, like PUC commissioners, with attached personal staff. They would be elected in a way that looks like a unicameral state legislature.

The public interest should be paramount here--not whether you as an individual get to retain a powerful seat. Upon appointment to these boards, each of you has been given a public trust.. Please don't forget that that is why you are here.