

MARIN ADVOCATES FOR TRANSIT

BOX 690, LARKSPUR, CA 94977

PHONE: 415 925 0718

Catalina Alvarado
Public Information Office
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607

Re: 1994 Regional Transportation Plan EIR

Dear Ms. Alvarado:

Marin Advocates for Transit is very supportive of MTC's mission of regional coordination, and well recognizes the importance of this task. In furtherance of that mission, we offer the following comments on the draft Regional Transportation Plan EIR. We hope that these comments will help focus the RTP and its EIR on a full range of policy options to optimize the environmental and social conditions of the Bay Area well into the next century.

The assumptions upon which the RTP is based are identified in MTC's Technical Summary of its Bay Area Travel Forecasts for Years 1990, 1996 & 2010. The future is projected as a continuation of current trends, with decreasing transit utilization and ever-increasing auto ownership, VMT, congestion and air pollution. One and a half million new residents are projected for the Bay Area during the planning horizon, and each one is expected to have a car! Our core objection to the EIR is its failure to test significantly different alternatives.

In the absence of effective regional government, the RTP represents the only forum for the analysis of land use and transportation from a regional perspective. Many residents of the Bay Area would disagree with MTC that the RTP alternatives represent the future they want. Neither the RTP nor the EIR asks whether the identified significant adverse impacts represent the best possible outcome.

The current state of the art in planning is that transit-accessible mixed uses in pedestrian-friendly configurations will significantly reduce the production of auto trips, because of the substitution of walking and bicycling for many non-work trips, and transit

for work trips. However, MTC's assumptions are based on the continued sprawling of auto-dependent suburban subdivisions and malls, where walking, bicycling and transit can be impractical.

This current thinking isn't all that bold or futuristic. In fact, pre-World War II traditional neighborhoods with good transit have been shown to produce 42% fewer auto trips than suburban neighborhoods. Clearly, if the Plan uses only status quo assumptions in its alternatives analysis, and the Plan is realized, it will have been, by definition, self-fulfilling. The very essence of planning, however, is to look at the consequences of alternatives. When the impacts are undesirable, a change in direction from the status quo is required.

In addition to the general comments below, we include specific comments as an appendix, along with a reprint of key pages from the landmark LUTRAQ study in Portland, Oregon.

Definition of Alternatives

We were unable to find anything in the EIR alternatives analysis that reflected the public comments from the Stage One Public Outreach. While recording these comments is a worthy task, our understanding of the ISTEPA process is that public agencies are supposed to actually respond to input from the public. As an expression of attitude towards public input, it is particularly revealing that the formal public hearing on the draft EIR is conducted not by the Commission, but by staff. This appears to be wholly unprecedented.

The most significant failing of the EIR is the inclusion in the Baseline of construction projects that are already part of the TIP, county sales tax programs, Regional Measure 1, and Resolution 1876. These projects add up to \$15.1 billion, an amount that dwarfs the \$3.8 billion to be programmed in Track 1. Earlier Public Outreach conveyed the distinct impression that the purpose of Track 1A was to model exactly these commitments, so as to decide whether these projects were still the optimal investments from a regional perspective.

This was a breach of faith with the public. Including these projects in all the alternatives meant that the differences in impacts of the alternatives would be masked by the much larger impacts of the already-committed projects. These were not meaningful or useful comparisons. In addition, the Track 1C alternative was initially going to re-program funds from transit capital to transit operating expenses, to prevent service reductions. While not possible under current federal law, the results of the analysis would provide a sound basis for policy that could include lobbying Congress for such a change.

In my comments for Stage 1 Public Outreach, I urged MTC to use the suggestions of David Jones, as reported in the June/July Transactions. In particular, he stated there "I think it would be appropriate for the RTP to articulate an investment policy that says

priority will be given to transit projects that are coupled with supporting zoning changes, and that highway projects will be conditioned on the adoption of growth management plans that embody provisions for open space preservation and subregional agreement on a growth budget that does not overload either transportation infrastructure or other forms of infrastructure. This, of course, was the proposal that MTC made as a condition for further consideration of the Mid-State Tollway and I think that approach has general application to all transportation investment--both highway and transit."

Several members of our organization commented that they would like MTC to adopt this same process for transportation funding. I found his ideas strikingly practical, intelligent and feasible, in that they could be implemented without any enabling legislation. These ideas were an obvious complement to the Track 1C alternative, yet they were ignored. Currently, local jurisdictions have no responsibility for the regional impacts they create. Through mechanisms such as Jones suggests, the serious environmental consequences of this dispersed responsibility can be managed.

The POLIS model was acknowledged on pg. 115 to not shift growth between counties, but only within them. Because of this limitation, Track 1C could not fully optimize the allocation of growth within the region to city-centered development. The model still supported significant growth in Solano and Napa counties. This would most likely cause an inefficient expenditure of scarce funds, as seen from a regional perspective. The desirability of encouraging the commute from the Central Valley must also be evaluated regionally.

Finally, the RAFT alternative was a surrogate for many of these ideas, with the recognition that auto dependence is not inevitable. Not including this citizen-led alternative in the EIR was an egregious violation of the spirit of ISTEA. Many of the elements in this alternative represent the most advanced thinking in the transportation field. Without it in the Plan, residents are condemned to a future that is just like the present, except more congested.

Without a real alternatives study, there can be no significant policy debates, for example, on the desirability of the dispersion of employment throughout the suburbs. There are very difficult tradeoffs faced by the Bay Area that can only be addressed from a regional perspective: congestion, public infrastructure costs, out-of-pocket commute costs, agriculture, the environment and our health.

We need to evaluate the impacts of long commutes on families, and on community cohesiveness and 'livability' before subsidizing more suburban sprawl. These are not local issues. The regional fiscal, social and environmental impacts of bad planning are severe. Given the acknowledged funding shortfall, we need a meaningful range of choices for how to best invest scarce resources. The draft EIR is not acceptable.

Cumulative Impacts

The analysis of cumulative impacts on pg. 268 is wholly inadequate. Stating the impacts as a list does not suffice as an analysis. No mitigations are proposed, and there is no qualitative or quantitative discussion of the significance of these cumulative impacts. Considering that this list represents the makings of an environmental crisis in the most beautiful metropolitan area in the United States and perhaps the world, this bland acceptance of inevitable decline is unworthy and unacceptable.

The cumulative impacts of growth on the fiscal ability of local governments to provide public services received no analysis. This is an especially gross failing of the EIR, as data indicates that sprawl development incurs infrastructure costs twice as high as compact development. In our own county, Marin, planning studies indicate that there are huge unfunded future public costs resulting from growth.

Finally, the two most significant mitigations in the EIR point out the failure of the current tools of governance. By requiring MTC to "Encourage development of a comprehensive long-range land use plan for the region" (pg. 120), the EIR is identifying a major weakness in MTC's ability to rationally provide transportation facilities, namely, the absence of a coherent set of land use goals. This lack is the root cause of the RTP's embarrassing need to qualify itself as "guided by vision if you interpret..." and having "vision if you define...." (pg. 5)

By stating that "The BAAQMD will establish measures to mitigate or limit emissions of particulate matter in an attainment plan prepared subsequent to EPA designation of the Bay Area as a non-attainment area" (pg. 76), the EIR is identifying another agency as responsible for mitigating the RTP's impacts. This is bald governmental irresponsibility. Even worse, BAAQMD can only effectively mitigate these impacts through alternatives that the EIR refused to study. Land use and pricing are key tools. A modern transportation MPO can't responsibly pursue its mission without integrated land use and air quality jurisdiction.

Conclusion

We believe the draft EIR to be legally inadequate because it is not responsive to the concerns of informed citizens duly stated as part of the RTP Public Outreach process. By considering only a narrow range of alternatives, ignoring the significant question of the transportation impacts of the design features of future growth and by choosing to not incorporate the current state of the planning art, the RTP's failure to find a mitigated alternative with substantial environmental benefits over the project makes it incomplete. The RTP does not comply with ISTEA-mandated citizen participation in the content of the Plan. Please note that, should any question of feasibility arise, the LUTRAQ alternative (the initial studies for which had major funding from EPA and FHA) is definitely one of the alternatives being studied in the Western Bypass EIR for Portland.

We urge that you send the draft back for a substantial reworking of the alternatives analysis, using the RAFT alternative as a starting point, so as to provide

decisionmakers with a sound basis for shaping a better future for all Bay Area residents. We believe the mobility results of the RTP are grim, with increased congestion and tiny increases in transit utilization, even after the expenditure of \$74 billion. To get the public interested in additional funding for Track 2, a real vision and better results will be required.

We look forward to helping MTC towards those ends. We will gladly lobby elected officials and work to educate the public, once MTC harnesses its technical expertise to analyze meaningful alternatives in a revised EIR. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at 415-383-9321. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on such an important policy document.

Sincerely,

David Schonbrunn
Steering Committee,
Marin Advocates for Transit

cc: Doug Wilson, MTC
Larry Orman, Greenbelt Alliance
John Holtzclaw, Sierra Club
Hank Dittmar, STPP
Marin Congestion Management Agency

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Appendix

RTP Comments

The last bullet of the Financial Assumptions on pg. 59 was incomprehensible. Does this mean you spend whatever you get, or you get whatever you need? Which is the constraining variable? Were cost estimates based on reality?

The RTP document should be edited so as to make the Investments charts readable to the general public. The removal of jargon would help make the regional planning process accessible to the average citizen.

The "Other Funds" column in the Investments charts was unnecessarily vague. What does "fully funded" mean when an "Other Funds" entry shows a deficit?

Provide a table similar to 4-1 to accompany revenue pie chart Figure 4-1. This would help in tracking such revenue sources as transit fares.

Include the cost of Baseline projects in Appendix A. The existing charts give no sense of magnitude for these projects. Full and clear disclosure of all these financial details would convey a sense that nothing is being hidden from public view.

Include a copy of Resolution 1876 in the Appendix.

The document would be vastly improved if it included a glossary.

We propose that the gas tax should be structured and marketed to the public as the cost of fully maintaining the transportation infrastructure. By specifically identifying the use of gas tax funds, this approach is more likely to receive public approval than the current perception that these revenues just disappear into The System. The scarcity of information in Table 4-1 on pg. 58 and Figure 4-1 makes it difficult to match expenditures with appropriate revenue sources. It seems like pulling out Transit Operations, Toll Bridge funds, and All Other Improvements would produce a maintenance budget of about \$23 billion. How much would the gas tax have to increase to yield this amount for the plan period?

EIR Comments

The No Project alternative is poorly defined. It is unclear why several corridors (i.e., # 9, 10 & 12 in table 3.2-1A) should perform better under No-Build. This either points out problems with the model or indicates that significant projects are currently underway. If the latter is the case, they should be clearly identified as elements of the No Project.

pg. 75. The analysis of Impact 2.2-1 is incorrect in finding the Project to have the same result as the No Project. This result occurs only because the RTP assumes auto-dominated growth. If, however, alternatives such as are proposed here were analyzed, the result would be that the Project causes the impact.

pg. 110, Table 2.5-4. The Employment Response column needs to include the notion of 'relatively' lower because these land values will not be lower than suburban land values. [The same confused writing appears on pg. 109, middle para.] Note that decentralization could be subject to regional land use policies.

pg. 112, bottom para., State and regional growth management policies, if there were any meaningful ones, would significantly affect how local jurisdictions respond to growth.

pg. 118, third para. should be "These changes would not take place unless local governments agree to substantially modify their land use plans."

pg. 118, fourth para., We vehemently disagree that improving accessibility has insignificant effects on the overall growth rate of the Bay Area. It is well-known that current congestion acts as a disincentive to locate new businesses in the Bay Area.