

# Public Decision Making for the CalTrain Downtown San Francisco Extension Project

ANDREW BUTLER NASH

The public input process used to refine alternatives being considered for extending commuter rail service to a new station in downtown San Francisco is described. At the study's outset there were two major build alternatives with numerous design options. Through the "design options screening" process, the number of build alternatives was reduced to one and the number of design options was reduced significantly. Reducing the scope of the study enabled resources to be focused on addressing the remaining critical questions in development of the draft environmental impact statement. The design options screening process consists of breaking the options into a series of questions, providing detailed information about each of the questions, and encouraging the public to weigh in on the questions. The process was very successful at focusing public involvement and in allowing the policy board to make decisions.

CalTrain provides commuter rail service along a 77-mi corridor from Santa Clara County to San Francisco. The corridor contains one of the Bay Area's densest concentrations of jobs and population, including the city of San Jose, Silicon Valley, Palo Alto (home of Stanford University), the rapidly developing area of San Mateo County along San Francisco Bay, San Francisco International Airport, and the southeast portion of San Francisco.

CalTrain currently (1997) operates 60 trains each weekday; most service is provided during the peak periods and in the peak direction (toward San Francisco in the morning and returning in the evening), although CalTrain operates trains on an hourly schedule through most of the day. Ridership is approximately 23,000 daily trips and has been growing almost 5 percent a year. The "reverse commute" market has grown substantially over the past several years as employment in Silicon Valley increases.

CalTrain is operated by the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (JPB), which took over the service from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) in 1992. Caltrans had taken over service from the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1980, when Southern Pacific threatened to abandon the service. The Southern Pacific (or predecessor companies) had operated passenger rail service on the corridor since the mid-1860s.

## A LONG-STANDING DREAM

Building a train station in central San Francisco has been a long-standing dream. Early in the century, noted architect Daniel Burnham prepared a plan for San Francisco that included a central train terminal in the Civic Center area. Burnham proposed a grand train terminal similar to Union Station in Washington, D.C. (a terminal he also designed). Several months after Burnham completed his design, the great 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed much of San

Francisco. The city was faced with a golden opportunity to implement his plan; alas, the goal was to rebuild as soon as possible and grand plans failed to win the day—although elements of Burnham's plan, including the city hall location, were completed over the years.

The next attempt at a downtown station started when Southern Pacific decided to construct a direct rail route, along San Francisco Bay, into the city to replace the longer route around the west side of San Bruno Mountain. The plan was to run along the Embarcadero to a terminal in front of the Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street. Southern Pacific's headquarters building, located at that site, was even designed in a "U" shape to accommodate the terminal. Unfortunately, San Francisco citizens objected to cinders from the steam engines that pulled trains and refused to allow the construction of the Market Street terminal.

Instead, Southern Pacific built a "temporary" terminal at Third and Townsend streets. This terminal was built for the 1913 Panama Pacific Exhibition held to celebrate San Francisco's rebuilding after the disastrous 1906 earthquake and fire. The Third and Townsend station, a Mission Revival building, was torn down in the early 1960s (before effective historic preservation laws), and the terminal was moved a block west to Fourth and Townsend streets to make room for a recreational vehicle park.

After the public took over the operation of commuter rail service on the corridor in 1980, many studies were completed to assess the future of rail service on the peninsula. Most of them recommended extending commuter rail downtown. At this time the service was named "CalTrain" by Caltrans, its first public-sector operator.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES AND ALTERNATIVE CALTRAIN TERMINAL LOCATIONS

San Francisco has a very concentrated downtown area. Unfortunately the CalTrain terminus is approximately 1.25 mi from the downtown core, requiring CalTrain passengers to complete their trip by transferring to shuttle buses. These buses can get caught in rush-hour traffic and provide unreliable connections, particularly during the evening peak, when passengers are rushing to catch specific express trains.

Since 1962 the CalTrain corridor has been the subject of more than 20 major transportation analyses, many of which focused on the downtown extension. In 1975, the Peninsula Transit Alternatives Project (PENTAP) studied various methods for improving mass transit on the San Francisco peninsula and recommended that commuter rail be extended to downtown San Francisco. Several years later, in 1984, following their takeover of the service, Caltrans completed a downtown terminal relocation study that recommended an underground terminal adjacent to the Transbay Bus Terminal (also owned by Caltrans).

Because of the controversy surrounding peninsula transportation problems, the California State Legislature, in 1985, passed Senate Concurrent Resolution 74 (SCR 74), which mandated completion of a Peninsula Mass Transit Study. This study evaluated nine systems-level solutions to peninsula transportation demand. It recommended extending CalTrain downtown and extending Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) service to San Francisco International Airport. The study also identified what is probably the most significant problem in implementing these major projects: financial and institutional responsibilities.

After the SCR-74 study was completed, interest groups favoring the CalTrain extension and others favoring the BART extension argued over the effectiveness and financing of the two projects. There was sizable controversy because many thought that there would not be enough funding for these two major projects. However, in 1987, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the Bay Area's regional transportation planning agency, passed Resolution 1876, which set forth a plan to fund both projects (as well as several other rail transit projects).

After the passage of MTC Resolution 1876, more detailed evaluation of CalTrain extension alternatives began. In 1987 the newly formed Peninsula Corridor Joint Study Board (the JPB's predecessor agency) completed the Interim Upgrade Study. This study recommended extending CalTrain downtown and evaluated a number of terminal locations.

In 1988, building on results of the Interim Upgrade Study, the JPB received authorization to complete a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) on the extension project. Work began in 1989 and included an evaluation of at least six downtown sites. The study was completed in 1993; it concluded that the Second and Market streets and Transbay Terminal sites were the most feasible. Unfortunately, the costs for these alternatives were too high to be funded under the MTC Resolution 1876 plan, so a new study was undertaken to find a lower-cost project.

In 1993–1994, the JPB and MTC took a fresh look at many of the alternatives that had been evaluated in previous studies and considered new ideas such as replacing heavy commuter rail service on the CalTrain line with light rail vehicles that could operate in the Muni Metro Market Street subway. In all, nine alternatives and numerous options for each alternative were considered. Upon completion of the study, the JPB, MTC, and the city of San Francisco agreed that two alternatives should be evaluated in a new DEIS. These two alternatives were the locally preferred alternative—an underground terminal at Market and Beale streets—and a fallback alternative—an aboveground terminal at a remodeled Transbay Terminal (Figure 1). Preparation of this study began in spring of 1995.

## **CALTRAIN DOWNTOWN EXTENSION STUDY PUBLIC INFORMATION PROCESS**

Preparation of the CalTrain Downtown Extension study provided the JPB with an opportunity to evaluate the previous planning efforts and to consider what had gone wrong. Why was so logical a project—extending a transit line into the heart of one of the most transit-dependent cities in the world—being stymied? The JPB decided that there were three main problems: first, not enough attention had been paid to technical and construction methods aimed at reducing project impacts on neighborhoods; second, it was difficult to fund the project; and, finally, public understanding of the project and its importance was limited.

The JPB decided that the new study would address these problems head-on, using the public information process to obtain valuable ideas from constituents, to communicate information to them, and to use their input to help define the alternatives and options.

The public involvement process was designed to take ideas from the public, elected officials, key decision makers, and public agency staff members and use them to help define the scope of the technical analysis and to assist in developing a financial plan for the project. Technical information developed by the project's engineering and planning consultants was translated into language that could be understood by the general public and was presented in a manner that made it easy for the public to participate. Finally, the visibility of a public process that was truly two-way gave the project itself greater credibility and importance in the community.

Development of the study took place in five stages: project initiation, evaluation of alternatives, refining of alternatives, preparation of the DEIS document, and planning for implementation. Use of the public input process during each of these stages is presented here.

### **Project Initiation**

In any study, the first step is to announce that the study is beginning and make certain that those who will be affected know about it. For the CalTrain Downtown Extension project, an extensive effort was made to inform the public. A study newsletter was mailed to more than 2,500 people and distributed door-to-door to another 5,000. Canvassers distributed the newsletter and met with interested residents and business owners along the proposed routes to talk with them about the project and invite them to a public meeting.

Three public meetings were held during June 1995 to discuss the study. The purpose of the meetings was to discuss the alternatives being studied in detail and to hear from the public.

On a parallel track, the study's public input consultants and the JPB staff completed approximately 40 stakeholder interviews with key decision makers. The purpose of these meetings was to describe the project alternatives, discuss the scope of work, and solicit advice and opinions from people interested in the project. As a result of these interviews, an atmosphere of trust developed between the JPB staff, consultants, and the community.

### **Evaluation of Alternatives**

The study's second stage, evaluation of alternatives, began with an analysis of public input received at the meetings. It was evident that three major factors needed to be addressed in order to have a successful public involvement program:

1. Several CalTrain Downtown Extension design options under consideration were unacceptable to the public and several design options recommended by the public appeared to have significant merit.
2. The CalTrain Downtown Extension study needed coordination with a study being completed by San Francisco and Caltrans on options for replacing the Transbay Bus Terminal.
3. The complexity of CalTrain alternative options and bus terminal coordination required the development of a carefully formulated public information plan to ensure effective public participation.

This section outlines important aspects of the public information program used to address these factors.

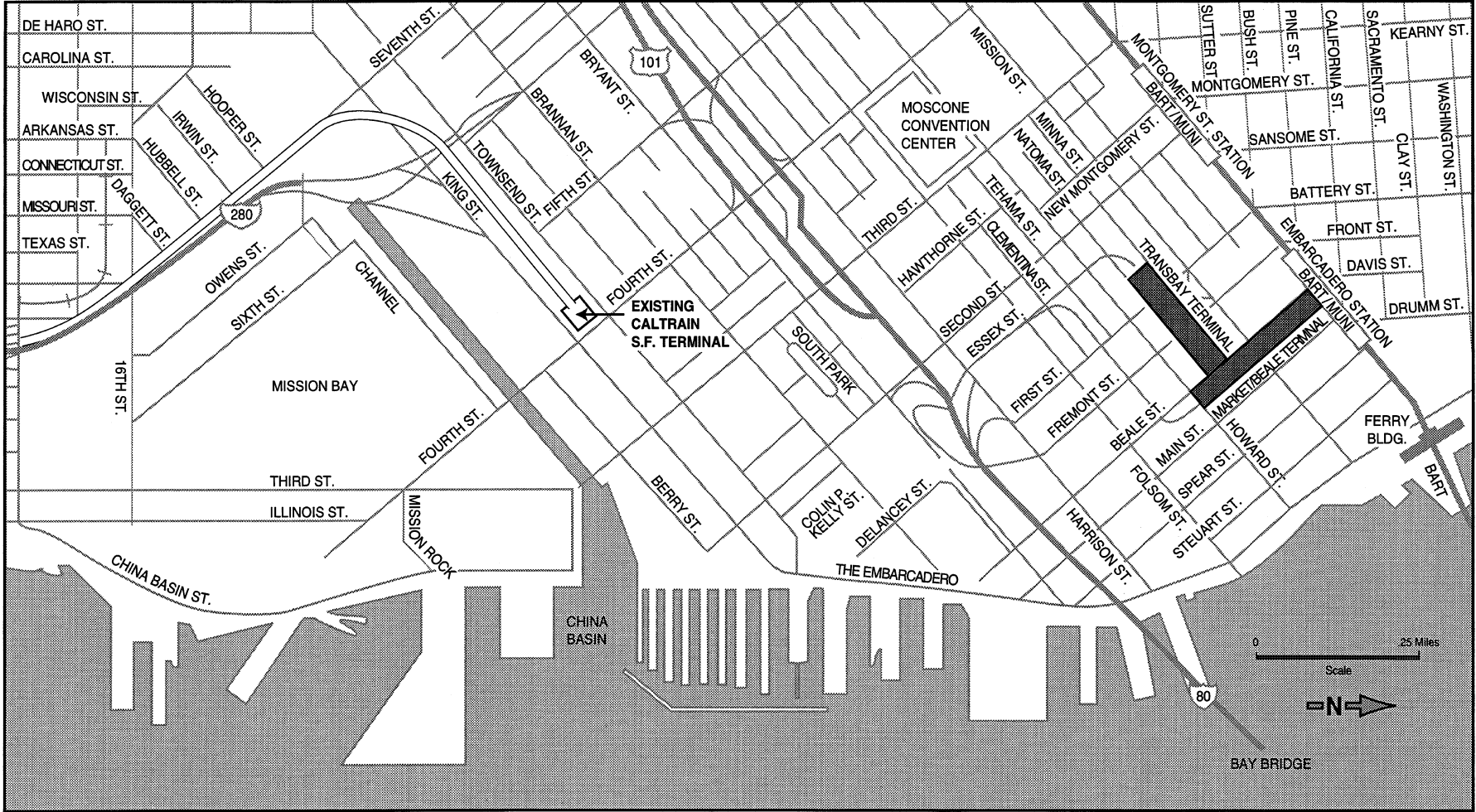


FIGURE 1 CalTrain downtown extension alternative locations.

### *Public Recommendations on Alternatives*

Following the initial series of public meetings, the JPB evaluated and analyzed the recommendations received. As a direct result of public input (and the associated technical analysis), the JPB voted to revise the alternatives being evaluated in the study. In this process the JPB eliminated the Brannan Street alignment options, agreed to study a portal at Seventh Street (longer subway), agreed to evaluate constructing a new Transbay Terminal (rather than remodeling the existing building), and agreed to study a more direct tunnel alignment to Transbay Terminal site.

The lead story of the project's second newsletter, entitled "The Community Has Spoken," described the changes that had been made in response to public input and included seven maps illustrating the alignments under consideration.

During the next several months the engineering consultants analyzed the alternatives and design options in detail. They evaluated ground conditions, construction techniques, terminal designs, track alignments, operating and capital costs, and bus terminal integration.

### *Coordination with Transbay Bus Terminal Study*

In addition to the CalTrain study, Caltrans and the city of San Francisco were studying replacement options for the Transbay Bus Terminal. The existing Transbay Bus Terminal, built over 50 years ago as part of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge, needs significant seismic and building code upgrades. The terminal had been built for electric trains that used the lower deck of the Bay Bridge; the terminal was converted for buses when buses replaced Bay Bridge trains.

The purpose of the city's study was to evaluate alternatives to simply upgrading the bus terminal building with the goal of improving the bus terminal as well as improving the area's development potential. The existing bus terminal and aerial access ramps were perceived as a barrier to development—in fact, the terminal's access ramp loop was referred to as the "ring of death" by developers.

The bus terminal replacement study started with many different concepts and sites, but by August 1995, the city had settled on two sites: a site between Main and Beale streets and the existing bus terminal site. Once this decision had been made, both studies were at the stage where the relationship between the train and bus terminals could be defined clearly and where the benefit of illustrating their interconnection was critical. Therefore, the JPB and the city developed a brochure designed to provide a "vision" for the new train/bus terminal and surrounding area.

The "City at the Crossroads" brochure described the need for new train and bus terminals and summarized and illustrated six different train/bus combinations. Each train/bus combination had a three-dimensional architectural illustration (from the same vantage point) and four plans/sections of the train and bus facility. This brochure was used by the public and policy boards to understand the different train/bus terminal locations and their relationship.

### *Design Options Screening Process*

While the City at the Crossroads brochure was being prepared, the JPB was also completing a detailed technical analysis of the design options associated with each of the CalTrain terminal alternatives. The problem confronting the JPB was how to involve the public in

the decision-making process when there were many different combinations of options under consideration and relevant information about those options was presented in highly technical studies. Specifically, the CalTrain project included the following options:

- Two east-west alignment options,
- Two portal locations,
- Two construction techniques,
- Two north/south alignment options,
- Three terminal configurations at the Market/Beale terminal site,
- Two terminal configurations at the Transbay Terminal site,
- Two storage yard sites, and
- Four propulsion options.

To solve this problem, the JPB broke the options into individual questions and presented technical information on each one, organized by question, in an easy-to-understand format. For example, Question 1 was, "Which east-west alignment and portal location should be selected? . . . Townsend Street (Portal at Fourth Street); Townsend Street (Portal at Seventh Street); and King Street (Portal at Sixth Street)?" (Figure 2).

The JPB used this format to structure all of its community outreach in this stage of the study. Using a consistent format was important because of the number and complexity of alternatives and design options. One measure of success was that the comment letters and testimony from the public also followed the question format. The public simply discussed issues associated with the question and then recommended an answer. Some answered all the questions, others focused only on questions important to them.

Furthermore, the question format also improved the quality of oral presentations to the various policy boards whose members were unfamiliar with the CalTrain project. One could provide the big picture and then focus on questions that were important to the group being addressed. For example, most of the San Francisco commissions were very concerned about the train terminal location, so discussions with them focused on that question.

In order to assist in the decision-making process, three levels of printed information were made available to the public: a newsletter that summarized the questions and answers; the Design Options Screening Report (DOS Report), a 70-page report that presented each of the questions and answers in more detail than the newsletter; and technical studies that presented detailed results of engineering and planning analyses. The newsletter was sent to the project mailing list and distributed at various San Francisco and regional policy board meetings. The DOS Report was mailed to approximately 500 people and copies were available at all meetings. Technical reports were made available by request, although the DOS Report provided a significant amount of technical information so there were relatively few requests for these reports.

Newsletter 3 and the DOS Report were issued to the public in September 1995 in order to enable San Francisco city commissions to develop recommendations for the Transbay Bus Terminal study and the CalTrain Downtown Extension Study. Three San Francisco commissions and many citizens advisory committees weighed in on the questions at the JPB's December meeting.

### **Refining Alternatives**

In January 1996 the JPB acted on the eight decisions. A testament to the success of the design options screening process was the fact

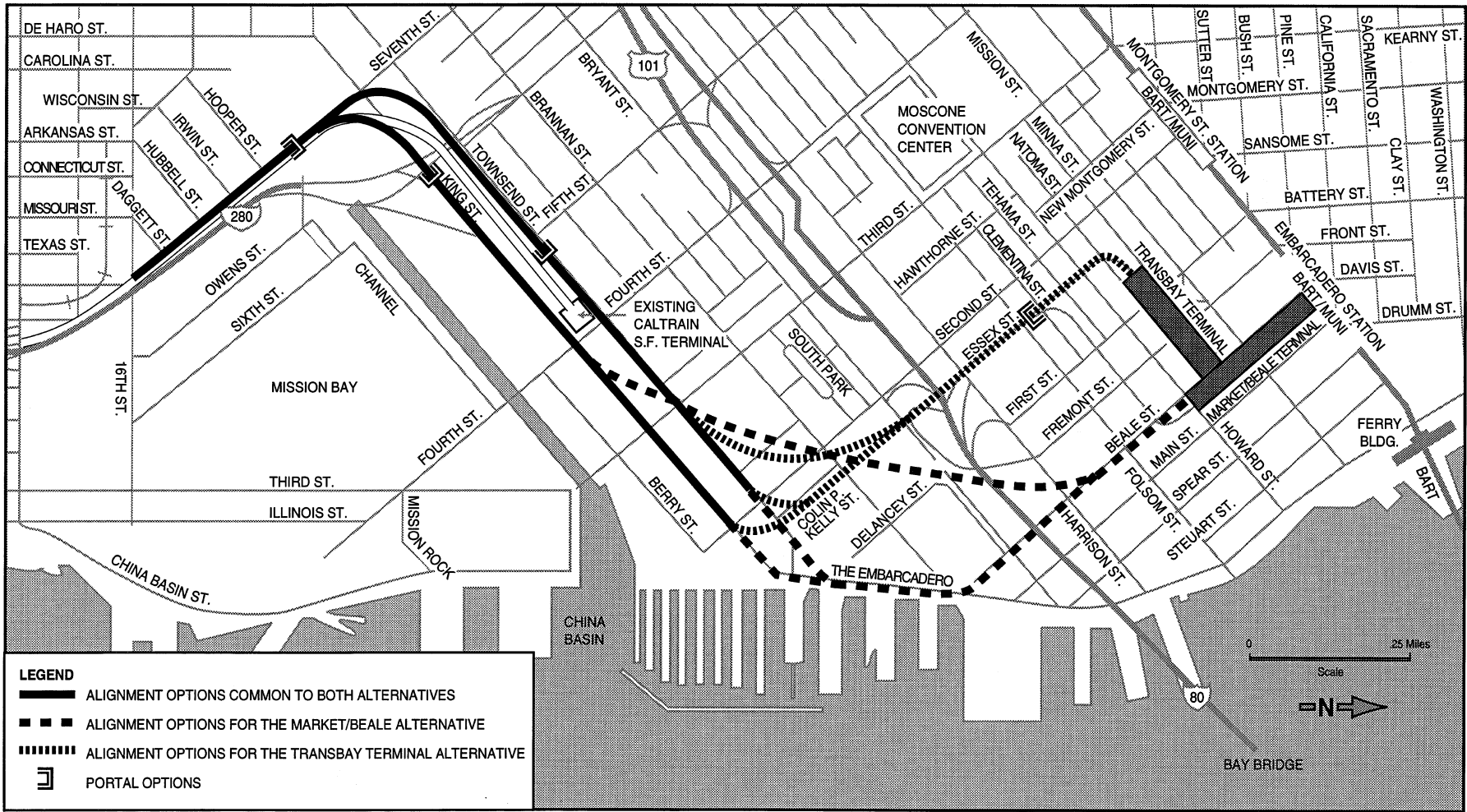


FIGURE 2 DOS Process Question 1: east-west alignment and portal location.

that there was near-consensus on all of the decisions, even a very significant decision to eliminate the Market/Beale Terminal site alternative from further analysis. The Market/Beale site had been San Francisco's and the JPB's locally preferred alternative at the start of the study, but the preponderance of public sentiment and technical analyses argued against it. The design options screening process allowed the JPB to eliminate this site relatively easily; other processes—ones that tied options into several complete alternatives—might not have led to such an outcome because of the project's complexity.

Once the JPB accepted the recommendations on the decisions and gave its direction on refinements to the project options, the technical analyses resumed. Newsletter 4 outlined the JPB's decisions and reasoning on the design options decisions. While significant progress had been made in terms of eliminating infeasible options, several alternative options were still under consideration. These alternative options were fully evaluated in the DEIS.

### Preparation of DEIS

The next step in the study was to begin formal preparation of the DEIS. The environmental process, in a nutshell, consists of evaluating a series of alternatives in a DEIS; selecting a locally preferred alternative (LPA); and, finally, responding to comments on the DEIS/conducting further technical analysis of the LPA in the final environmental impact statement (FEIS).

In the DOS process, many alternatives had been evaluated and a series of options had been recommended for further study. The technical studies of those options formed the basis for information presented to the public in the DEIS document. Because of the success of the DOS process, the JPB decided to use a similar process in developing the LPA for the FEIS. A series of five questions (Figure 3) were developed in the DEIS for selection of the LPA:

1. East-west alignment options along Townsend Street,
2. Tunnel alignments through the South Beach Neighborhood,
3. Alternative bus terminal options,
4. Storage yard sites, and
5. Three propulsion options.

Questions 1 and 2 addressed options related to South Beach Neighborhood impacts, and Question 3 directly addressed replacement of the Transbay Bus Terminal. Both these issues were identified in the DOS process as significant concerns of the public and are outlined in more detail in the following.

#### *South Beach Neighborhood Impacts*

The CalTrain extension would travel underground on the western border of San Francisco's South Beach neighborhood. Residents and businesses in the South Beach area were very concerned about the construction impacts, especially because they had lived with the impact of some 3 years of reconstruction of the Embarcadero.

The neighborhood was able to use the information presented in the DOS process to constructively influence the process in two ways; first, they led the opposition to the Market/Beale alternative, which would have required cut-and-cover construction through their neighborhood; and, second, they asked the JPB to evaluate mined construction techniques that could be used to minimize impacts in their neighborhood.

As part of the technical analyses completed for the DEIS, the JPB completed a comprehensive geotechnical analysis on ways to reduce construction impacts to the neighborhood while utilizing safe and efficient mined-tunneling techniques. Results of the geotechnical study were included in the DEIS and summarized in the study newsletter 6.

#### *Transbay Bus Terminal Interface*

The JPB's decision to focus on an underground train terminal at the Transbay Terminal narrowed the number of possible train/bus terminal location combinations. More important, the decision meant that building the CalTrain downtown extension required tearing down the existing Transbay Bus Terminal. Since that would be a major impact of the CalTrain extension, construction of a new bus terminal as part of the downtown extension DEIS was evaluated as a project mitigation measure.

Four bus terminal mitigation options were evaluated in the DEIS:

1. New bus terminal building at the Main/Beale site (across the street from the existing Transbay Terminal and future underground CalTrain terminal);
2. New bus terminal building above the underground CalTrain Terminal at the Transbay Terminal site;
3. Surface bus facility (lot) at the Main/Beale site; and
4. Surface bus facility at the Transbay Terminal site.

Adding the bus terminal mitigation option to the CalTrain study added to the complexity of the study—ironically, just as the number of CalTrain design options had been reduced through the DOS process.

To explain the bus terminal mitigation options to the public, the JPB described them in Newsletter 5 and at two public meetings. The first meeting described bus transit operations, and the second described joint development opportunities. Both meetings were held as panel discussions with experts presenting information on the alternatives and then the public asking questions and making comments.

### Planning for Implementation

The final stage of the study was planning for implementation. This stage consisted of selecting the project's LPA and deciding whether to complete an FEIS on the project.

The DEIS was released for public comment in March 1997. As described, due to the success of the DOS process, JPB used a similar process for selecting the LPA. Newsletter 6 defined the five design options under consideration for the LPA and outlined three financing scenarios for the project. The DEIS presented more technical information on the design options and financing scenarios. The JPB is expected to designate an LPA and decide whether to pursue the extension (complete the FEIS) in early summer 1997.

### CONCLUSIONS

Effective public input is an important aspect of any major planning project. By listening to the public, professionals can learn to design projects that minimize impacts to communities and engender

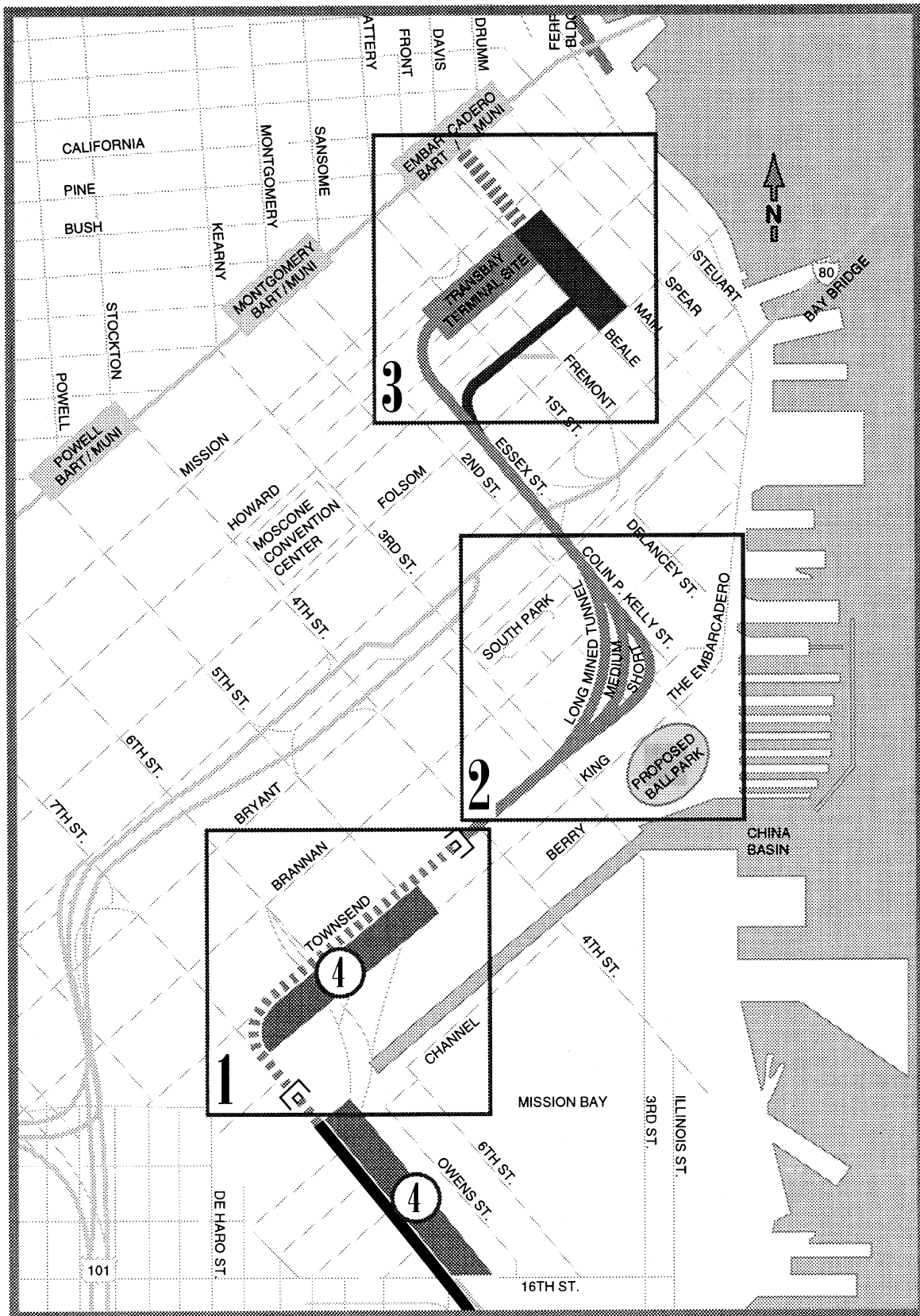


FIGURE 3 Selecting LPA decisions.

support from the public—both critical elements in a successful effort to build major infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the public often has good ideas that can be used in the project design because they do not come to the table with a well-defined set of solutions. The public is often good at thinking beyond the box.

Public participation was critical in the CalTrain Downtown Extension study because the project would be constructed through a severely congested downtown area causing potentially large construction impacts, and because there was not a strong level of institutional and public support for the project. The public participation process was designed to inform the public about the project, listen to their concerns on project impacts, provide people with information specifically related to their concerns, and understand what institutional and financial issues needed to be addressed in order to implement the project.

The design options screening process was used to successfully address these important issues. The basic technique was to break the problem into several critical decisions, to provide the public with detailed information on the potential problem solutions and to encourage public comment on them, and to make the decisions using public input and technical information. The benefit of this approach is very complex public policy decisions can be recast in such a way that the public and decision makers can participate together in reaching decisions. Furthermore, this approach forces decisions to be made by clearly laying out the questions and more importantly the answers and their ramifications. Finally, the process provides a structure that helps maximize the effectiveness of the public involvement process.

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