

## **Regional Government for the San Francisco Bay Area**

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### **Introduction**

In today's global society regions are the most relevant geographic unit. Just listen to people, they're from San Francisco (but live in Milpitas), they're going on vacation in Paris (not France), they work in New York (in Stamford, Connecticut). Perhaps more importantly, it is regions which compete with one another for economic development not cities or even countries. And, they compete by offering a bundle of regional attributes: housing, recreation, education, transportation, and environmental quality.

A trusted maxim is that governing should be done at the lowest level possible. Thus local government should handle as many problems as possible, only if local government cannot handle a problem should it be kicked up to a higher level of government. For many years experts have argued that certain issues must be addressed on a regional level, and in fact, many regional agencies have been created to deal with particular issues. Many have successfully addressed that issue, today's problem – emphasized by the fact that regions are in such fierce competition with each other – is that problems have become so inter-related that they can not be solved by single purpose agencies.

In a nutshell, to compete effectively with other regions, we need a coordinated program to develop our economy, protect our environment, and improve our social equity, and this can only be accomplished with a comprehensive regional government.

### **Infrastructure and Services Funding**

One of the biggest problems we face is funding. While in the past cities and counties have been able to rely on state and federal programs to build infrastructure, protect open space and support social programs, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that continuing to rely on these sources is a dead end. Not only are both the state and the federal governments running huge deficits, but their long term financial outlook is not promising. What will happen to federal transportation programs when the baby boom generation begins collecting social security?

It's unwise to count on particular programs such as the 'dedicated gas tax' since, like many traditional government-provided services, costs for transportation improvements and services are rising much more rapidly than these taxes. The future ability to increase these taxes to pay the increased costs will be reduced or precluded by the need to increase other taxes to pay for programs such as social security.

The main point is that if public opposition and competition from other programs means that raising taxes is not a likely option, we will need to solve our problems ourselves. The best way of doing this is to develop innovative ways of delivering services and financing programs, this is the role that regional government can play.

There are numerous examples of new government agencies created in the past several years that have proven to be extremely effective and efficient. County transportation authorities are good examples. These agencies collect a half-cent sales tax and use the revenues to fund construction of transportation projects. They have been successful at breaking the logjam and constructing much needed transportation projects quickly and economically. They provide good lessons for organizing regional government.

## **Leadership**

An agency can be extremely efficient and effective, but if it has a limited long term vision, the results will be unsatisfactory. Returning to transportation, an effective regional transportation agency may build the best transit system ever, but if it's not coordinated with land use, or is inappropriate for the existing land use pattern, it will not help make the region more attractive. A closely related problem is that investing in this project will reduce funds available for other more efficient projects.

This is perhaps the biggest problem with our existing single purpose regional agencies. A good example being regional transportation planning. The Bay Area is counting on receiving billions of dollars in state and federal aid for mega-projects, which, while certainly very worthwhile, are unlikely to receive adequate funding given today's economy. Furthermore, the objectives of many mega-projects can often be much better achieved through lower cost projects saving money for other worthy projects.

Two particular examples are San Francisco's Third Street Subway, which could be replaced by a surface light rail project with transit priority, and Santa Clara's BART extension, which could be replaced by a comprehensive electrified commuter rail network centered on San Jose. Both replacement projects would be much better than the proposed mega-projects because they would provide service to a much larger area at a much lower cost.

Unfortunately, there is little incentive for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area's regional transportation authority, to exert leadership on county transportation plans since MTC commissioners are mostly county representatives seeking funding for their counties. And, what incentive is there for a county to propose a truly cost effective project when they are competing for 'unlimited' federal and state funding?

## **Comprehensive Approach**

The second problem with single purpose agencies is that they are, naturally, focused on a single purpose. This means that their solutions are often ineffective, (it's quite a nice freeway, but completely congested because we have no control on land use), or worse, problematic (it's quite a nice freeway, but now we need to rebuild the water, sewer, and local road networks to cope with the development caused by the freeway). This is not to pick on transportation agencies, other single purpose agencies have the same problems.

Development is necessary, it just needs to be better planned on the regional level. Importantly, this does not mean forcing development on local jurisdictions, but rather providing the appropriate infrastructure and services for the level of land development. This means that cities that wanted to increase densities would receive regional funding for the costs incurred, from new roads to funding for operating schools.

## **Summary**

The Bay Area needs a regional government that can efficiently and effectively address regional problems. There are several crucial points in organizing this government.

First, regional government must address the correct issues. For example, regional transportation issues should be addressed regionally, not by individual counties. Local transportation should be addressed by local governments.

Second, regional government must be able to develop creative programs for funding and implementing its responsibilities. We need to save money and do more, meeting this challenge means thinking differently about how government does business and provides services.

Third, regional government must solve problems comprehensively, in other words, by linking together programs systematically. Development policy is the best example, land development should be controlled so that it supports – and is supported by – provision of adequate infrastructure. By definition, today's single purpose agencies can't think outside the box.

Globalization has created a world where countries matter less than regions. People and companies choose to locate based on regional attractiveness, vacations are made to regions, people identify with regions. We must therefore start to govern regionally.

### **References**

Document from Surface Transportation Policy Project on regional government efforts in California and elsewhere, includes descriptions and web addresses:

<http://www.transact.org/ca/RegionalVisioning.pdf>

Source for interesting planning information: <http://www.planetizen.com>