

## **San Francisco Bay Area Regional Rail Plan: A Vision**

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*Note: The following article describes a vision for rail service in the San Francisco Bay Area. The article combines ideas for what could be implemented with ideas for the public process that could be used to develop and refine the plan itself. The article is presented in the form of a speech from one of the participants in the study twenty five years in the future. The MTC, Caltrain, BART and the California High Speed Rail Authority are currently developing a regional rail plan (<http://www.bayarearailplan.info/>) for the Bay Area.*

Wow, 25 years? I suppose I shouldn't have been shocked to receive the invitation celebrating the first quarter century of California high speed rail service, but I was. It made me think about so many people, so many fights, so many late nights, in short so much history. The governor asked me to tell you a little bit about that history, what really happened, in my own words. I apologize if some of this sounds personal, but transportation systems are more than just concrete, steel and wheels, they are a fundamental part of our lives and help define our world.

It was over thirty years ago, when fresh from a masters degree in urban planning I moved to San Francisco in search of work that could make a difference in the world. Like many idealistic planners I lived in the Mission with a group of fellow twenty-somethings. We used to laugh about how different we were from the group on "Friends" but we often found ourselves in similar situations.

My first job was with an affordable housing developer. The work was hard, especially in the Mission, ground zero for gentrification. One of my projects was to track regional planning, looking for ways to increase affordable housing. That's how I got involved in the regional rail planning study. Looking back, we had a lot to learn.

### **2005 – The Beginning**

In 2005 even my most idealistic environmentalist friends drove everywhere. Frankly, transit was just an unreasonable alternative for too many trips. The rail systems were disconnected, it was hard to get to and from stations, schedules were uncoordinated and everyone had different fares. We had to learn to make transit a reasonable alternative.

We were also worried about land use. In the Mission we worried about gentrification and too many new businesses moving in. But it was such a great neighborhood, full of life, activity and energy. We had to learn how to clone the Mission not how to preserve it.

Others worried about the environmental and economic impacts of low density development sprawling into the Bay Area's rich farmlands and natural areas – to say nothing of beyond the Bay Area. (Can you imagine people driving themselves – alone – two hours each way over congested roadways between San Jose and Modesto, EVERYDAY just to find affordable housing!)

So, that sets the scene, the Bay Area was a real land-use and transportation basket case (although to be fair, it was the only place in the world with problems). Since I'm not a railroad person I'll start with how we approached land use before moving on (get it?) to transportation.

### **Land-Use**

I believe that the rail plan's biggest success has been in terms of land use and I think that's fine because, transportation is not an end, it's a means. Using transportation investments to help support land use patterns that protect our environment and make the Bay Area more successful economically and from a social equity perspective is, I think, what it's really all about.

Of course we still have a long way to go, but I think we have been at least moderately successful. We've built new neighborhoods with a similar mixed-use moderate density feel to the Mission or Rockridge around the Bay Area near the transit centers created as part of the rail program. I'm proud of what we accomplished in this area because, while there was general agreement in 2005 that these types of neighborhoods were a good idea, no one could figure out exactly how to get them built.

I am also proud to say that my family and I were among the first to move to one of these new neighborhoods; living there really converted me towards this new version of traditional urban neighborhoods. I love being able to shop without a car, being within easy biking distance of a regional park and having neighbors who I know and can speak to. The diversity of ages and lifestyles made it a great place to raise our family. There were always other kids to play with, and a neighborhood full of seniors and young people looking out for them. The innovative housing program we invented and pushed through state law that allowed people to buy-into a residential complex and move between different units without changing their tax basis was a good short term solution to the residential mobility problem caused by Proposition 13. It also made it easier to finance new affordable housing near transit stations outside cities.

### **Building Blocks for Regional Rail**

But, these neighborhoods never would have developed without the creation of the regional rail network. Boy, that sounds like a mouthful – Regional Rail Network – but, the trick to this was, I think, focusing on a series of small projects and programs designed to make the existing system work better. These then formed the building blocks for a set of larger projects including high speed rail. It's funny to think that we prepared the plan without knowing whether the high speed network would ever be built.

When we were developing the plan we talked alot about the many destination problem for public transit, the fact that it was hard for transit to serve low density markets with high quality service. Slowly we realized that we needed to accomplish three key objectives: first, connect rail stations with high quality transit service, second, encourage formation of moderately high density mixed use neighborhoods around stations, and third, create extremely effective multimodal access to the stations. Using this program of three mutually reinforcing elements we were able to start a chain reaction where the small projects led to larger projects and eventually to an effective and efficient integrated regional transportation network.

I think the key to our success was making it easy to use the transit system. I know that transit isn't always the right choice (sometimes you just have to drive), but by making the system easy to use we were able to increase ridership, thus generating more demand (and funding) for the next round of improvements.

Making transit easy to use included investing in level boarding for all modes – can you imagine how slow Muni would be if we still needed to go up those steps to get on? – which was a real help as our population has aged, introducing the common ticketing system and fare machines throughout the network, coordinating bus schedules with rail schedules, and providing easy to access transportation information.

### **Information Technology and Economic Development**

Speaking of easy to access information, how many of you remember how crazy it was before PAT? Sorry, I always forget to explain my acronyms, but everyone here knows PAT, the Bay Area's Personal Assistant for Transportation which we developed to help make it easier to use public transit. Can you remember when you could not simply tell PAT you wanted to go somewhere and she, sorry it, would pay your fare, tell you when to leave, guide you through unfamiliar areas with step-by-step directions (if you needed them), and tell you about schedule changes. Integrating the PAT technology with iPods was a really great step forward – a real combination of entertainment and information.

This raises one of my pet peeves with people who criticize visionary projects like the regional and high speed rail programs. The Bay Area never would have become a world leader in combining geographic information systems, telecommunications and artificial intelligence without investing in coordinating our

local, regional and statewide transportation systems. Developing this technology here as part of the rail plan has helped bring hundreds of good paying creative jobs to the Bay Area – this would not have happened without our investment in the rail systems. And, of course, it's taken the guess-work out of regional transit!

### **High Speed Rail**

Of course the real reason we're here today is to celebrate 25 years of high speed train service in California. I remember the opening well, not of course the boring speeches (though I am sure you all will remember this one, right?) but the beautiful clean vibrant new station – so different from the old bus station it replaced.

Can you imagine today that people once thought this new station would be a waste of money? Compared to what I ask? More hours spent wasting expensive gas in traffic jams? Continued sprawling development through California's rich farmlands? Sure we took a chance that we could link land use policies with the new regional and statewide high speed rail systems to encourage smart growth, and that we would be able to leverage these systems into increased economic growth, but what were the alternatives? How would we have fared without an efficient rail system to move our people and goods in California's second energy crisis? Who can forget how much truck traffic was removed from our freeways once the rail freight public private partnership improvements came on line, and how much cleaner our air became as a result?

But, for me the high speed rail system has a personal meaning as well. Many of you know that I met my partner on a weekend I spent in Santa Monica, I can tell you I never would have made that trip by plane, but the high speed rail system changed long distance travel in California making it fun, comfortable, and, for me at least, exciting. Can you remember what it was like traveling by air before high speed rail? Who can forget those wasted hours in airports and planes as the system struggled to keep up with increasing demand and new regulations. The high speed network reduced demand and its convenient airport stations gave people throughout the state easy access to long distance flights. They probably won't admit it, but the airlines have also benefited by reducing the number of short flights, especially with joint ticketing on high speed rail to smaller cities.

What I really like about the high speed rail system is how it has changed my perspective of the state. Now I feel closer to Los Angeles (of course not everyone would consider that good), and I work more closely with people there. Sometimes we meet in Fresno at the conference center located at the rail station, sometimes we meet in San Francisco or Los Angeles, but the important point is that it's easier for us to collaborate since travel is easier and more convenient. I believe that this has been one of the keys to the high speed rail system's success: innovative programs that made people use the transportation system to do different things.

### **It's Not Just People**

Finally, we public transportation wonks are often criticized for forgetting that the biggest part of transportation isn't moving people, it's moving goods. And, I can tell you that if we had not considered freight specifically in the plan not only would we have produced a meaningless document, but we would have missed out on some of our greatest successes.

The best example was how we were able to attract some of the overnight delivery business to the regional rail system. This meant fewer FedEx and UPS trucks clogging up downtown streets and freeways, added life to rail stations by integrating package drop-off and pick-up stores in the stations, and these shippers even helped fund construction of the BART Oakland Airport Connector (since it provided direct access for their packages to Oakland Airport's overnight express hub).

We learned a lot working with the overnight companies and applied these lessons to other elements of urban logistics and delivery. It's great how the rail network is now being used to help move everything

from food to recycling to garbage in and out of our crowded urban centers – and all being done at night when the rail system isn't being used to move people.

I would have to say that our biggest success in the freight area has been to develop a regional distribution system that helps take some of the big trucks off our crowded freeways. We needed to work very closely with the freight railroads on this effort, at first they were skeptical, but as we began to learn their concerns and they began to see a new market in regional logistics that could develop with additions to the railroad network proposed as part of the regional rail plan (indeed, some of which were made to improve freight transportation exclusively), the railroads came on board. Having an energy efficient regional distribution system for all the necessities of life helped us weather California's second gasoline crisis with minimal impact on prices of food and goods.

### **The 2005 Regional Rail Study**

So, how did all this get done? We didn't have the luxury of a Robert Moses to simply command construction of the new rail systems. Instead, we, residents, interest groups, government and planners, pieced together the plan. It wasn't easy, but where would California have been if we had not risen to the occasion and built the statewide high speed rail network? How could the Bay Area have improved its economy and livability without rethinking and rebuilding its regional transit network?

These networks, which in light of California's second energy crisis, the new biotech economy and our huge elderly population seem like common sense, seemed nothing like that in 2005. How exactly did we come to grips with the problem and do something? That's what I'd like to talk about now, because that's the most interesting part of the story.

When I arrived, fresh from planning school, transportation was a major topic in the Bay Area. Everyday real people complained about public transit, "it doesn't go where I want to go," "it's too slow," "I don't know how much it costs," "the bus was late again," "I don't feel safe waiting in the stations at night," and you could read in the paper that different transit agencies were arguing with each other and being sued by citizen's groups. Others were complaining that poor transportation was hurting the economy and uncoordinated land use planning was forcing people to drive hours every day just to afford homes. It was crazy. Gradually, regional leaders realized that we needed to do something to protect the Bay Area's economy and environment.

The process started at the state level with planning for California's high speed rail system. Studies took place beginning in the 1990s and gradually became more serious. At about the same time Bay Area transit agencies started working together on joint projects such as commuter rail from San Jose to Sacramento and San Jose to San Joaquin County – it's funny to think now that at that time all these train services had different names and different management.

At about the same time BART was able to complete its first extension projects, Caltrain transitioned from a sleepy commuter train to an innovative transit service, and San Francisco became serious about building a new multimodal transportation terminal to anchor a new mixed use high density neighborhood downtown.

These positive developments combined with the growing demand for improved regional transportation led leaders to propose a regional rail study to consider how to better integrate the region's rail transit systems, to improve the coordination of land uses with regional transportation and to coordinate regional rail transit with the proposed high speed rail system to improve both systems' efficiency and cost effectiveness.

This all sounds like standard planning jargon – at least for me, a reformed planner – but the way it was done was most interesting. Remember, I participated in this process as a radical land use planner, but then again everyone had strong opinions, and getting us all to work together was the real key to development and later implementation of the rail plan.

### **Process, Process, Process**

The process we used wasn't so different from the standard planning process, we set goals, developed criteria, brainstormed alternatives, analyzed them, and made recommendations. From my perspective the key was how the study team approached the alternatives development and analysis process.

First they provided us with information on how a truly integrated and coordinated rail transit system could operate, this information consisted of real examples from throughout the world of the elements and operating scenarios that could be part of an effective regional rail system. Next, we used these examples as a basis for developing other ideas – often combining ideas from different places with our local experience in new and interesting (we thought) ways. The study team helped guide us in this effort, but were also quick to point out any technical shortcomings of our ideas. I have to say that this made quite a few of us mad at the time, but in retrospect, it helped keep us on track and allowed us to develop a plan with actions that were clearly defined and could be implemented.

### **Open Source Public Involvement**

One of the techniques the study team used was OSPI, sorry, Open Source Public Involvement. Again, it's hard to imagine a time when OSPI did not exist, but we really were the guinea pigs. Our OSPI process started with a WIKI-type database of rail transportation improvements and examples (including transportation and land use coordination programs) that formed the basis for developing alternatives.

The Bay Area Rail Plan WIKI was a new concept and of course now we are proud of having developed it but at the time we were skeptical. The WIKI was an on-line website that allowed anyone to comment, add information, and make recommendations in real time.

The WIKI proved to be an extremely effective tool to both provide detailed technical information to the public as well as to allow them to participate in the planning process. The WIKI was first put on-line with the presentation of the initial list of network alternatives early in the study and was modified as the study went on (of course we are still using the latest generation today to help improve the network). The consultants made use of several other studies being completed at the same time on transit system connectivity and ridership forecasts to help provide information for the WIKI and to insure that the different studies were closely coordinated.

While we thought that the WIKI would be helpful in the public involvement process we hadn't expected that it would be so useful in helping implement the rail plan. The WIKI allowed us to complete detailed engineering and environmental studies much more quickly, since a great deal of technical information was provided by groups and the public as part of the process of adding information to the WIKI.

Then, as now, the most contentious planning questions had to do with land use – how could we integrate the rail system with land use planning – and governance – who should control how the regional rail system operates and expands. In both areas the consultant team used the WIKI to provide us with real world examples of how other areas of the world had addressed similar problems. Of course the Bay Area is different, so while we used the information on the best practices elsewhere, what we ultimately developed was an approach that worked acceptably for all the key stakeholders. The consultants kept us focused on developing a plan that could be implemented and serve as a first step for further progress.

### **The Final Plan**

By keeping us grounded with real world examples and best practices, but also encouraging us to combine and refine these creatively, all the while imposing the discipline that what we developed needed to be implemented, we were able to complete the plan. It's been revisited and revised many times since, I especially like the new real-time plan revision process that we developed about ten years ago that allows us to update the plan with new information and the results of the latest studies as they are approved or become available. I am especially proud that the federal government has chosen to use our approach as a model for the nation.

In summery then, I must say that developing the Bay Area's first regional rail plan was not always a pretty process, but as you can see when you look around and think of how far we have come since those crazy days early in the century, I'm sure you will agree with me when I say it was worth it.

Well, I've rambled long enough, but we still have ten minutes to catch the train down to Los Angeles for the community celebration in Schwartznegger Station, and in the words of our former Governor, Hasta La Vista Baby!