

GRIDLOCK

How Can the San Francisco Bay Area Avoid Transportation Paralysis?

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People are upset and frustrated, because they can't get where they want to go in a timely, reliable and easy manner. Transportation in the San Francisco Bay Area is nearing a crisis point. Commuters are too often stuck on freeways, trains, buses and ferries that are filled to capacity and beyond. People are saying the situation is getting worse with no end in sight.

"Traffic, everyone knows, is one of the bigger hassles of modern life. Since 1982, while the U.S. population has grown nearly 20 percent, the time Americans spend in traffic has jumped an amazing 236 percent. In major American cities, the length of the combined morning-evening rush hour has doubled, from under three hours in 1982 to almost six hours today. The result? The average driver now spends the equivalent of nearly a full workweek each year stuck in traffic. That's not just lost time—it's real money. Congestion costs Americans \$78 billion a year in wasted fuel and lost time—up 39 percent since 1990." [Phillip Longman, U.S. News & World Report, May 28, 2001]

Californians are very familiar with these problems. Jim Wasserman, Associated Press, wrote on June 25, 2001: "Despite some of the best minds in the nation and its creativity in movies and technology, California is nearly as renowned for what's wrong—gridlocked freeways, marathon commutes, smog and stratospheric housing prices. State governments elsewhere are experimenting with aggressive top-down solutions to their growth problems. But California, which turned cruising into pop culture and boasts more cars than registered drivers, lags in its customary role as trendsetter."

According to a study by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) published on May 23, 2001 the top priorities for Bay Area transportation system improvements include several modes of transportation—cars, buses, light rail, BART, Amtrak & CalTrain, bikes and ferries. MTC research identifies a complex Bay Area transportation problem where inefficiencies exist within each mode of transportation and between modes of transportation. Clearly, a solution will involve a balanced use of all transportation modes. The question today is: how do we achieve a balanced transportation system in the Bay Area?

More and more people in the San Francisco Bay Area are talking about the frustration they feel, wasting tremendous amounts of time and resources while stuck in transit. People feel powerless. Businesses lose revenue. The environment suffers. The problem seems to be universal, affecting people across the socio-economic spectrum. There seems also to be a lack of resolve by decision makers to do what the public says it wants—efficient and affordable transportation. Can the San Francisco Bay Area avoid transportation paralysis?

Approach 1: Improve and Build Freeways and Roads

The geography of the San Francisco Bay Area requires an effective infrastructure for highway travel. The bay is a natural barrier to mass transit solutions that require a central hub. The flexibility of highway travel is not an option for Bay Area residents—it's essential. This approach recognizes that the problem of gridlock grows from our failure to maintain and build the freeways and roads that our Bay Area geography requires. For decades, we have incorrectly dedicated ourselves to mass transit solutions to our unique Bay Area transportation needs. Commuters are joined on the roads by thousands of trucks that literally keep the economy of the Bay Area healthy. Business is suffering from traffic problems. Relief is needed on the freeways, so let's build more lanes and use technology to speed commercial, commuter and recreational driving throughout the Bay Area. Efficient highway travel will always be critical to the Bay Area economy and culture. We need to invest more in research and commit more resources to move traffic smoothly and dependably.

What Can Be Done?

- Build more freeway lanes and maintain existing roads better
- Trucks already pay a lot in highway taxes—balance the funding inequity by putting a “use tax” on commute traffic
- Commit enough lanes on freeways for efficient bus and truck traffic to free more lanes for car use only
- Increase bridge tolls and convert some freeways into “toll roads” to pay for freeway construction
- Dramatically increase the capacity of major freeway interchanges to minimize chronic traffic bottlenecks
- Restrict business traffic in congested areas and strictly enforce “truck routes”
- Abolish the split speed limit for cars and trucks that hinders traffic flow and is believed to increase the accident rate
- Invest in new technology for signal timing and more efficient traffic movement
- Maintain roads for more efficient use—fix the potholes!
- Increase the number of service vehicles to remove breakdowns and accidents

In Support

- Highway travel is not an option for most people and most businesses—they are essential for survival in the workplace and society.
- Flexible travel on highways is essential to keep our Bay Area economy strong. Many businesses have lengthened their business day, because consumers can't reach them during regular business hours. This makes business less productive.
- Mass transit and “smart communities” cannot deliver the goods to stores—trucks are essential and they need to travel efficiently on highways.
- Mass transit isn't necessarily efficient or cleaner—they must be full most of the time to be more efficient than cars.
- Personal safety is a serious concern on many public transit modes.

- It's difficult to avoid the spread of airborne disease and viruses on crowded buses and trains as well as carpools.

In Opposition

- Just tell the truth—cars are the problem with Bay Area transportation.
- Our existing highways will handle commercial and recreational traffic, and some commute traffic—building more highways will only increase car commuting.
- Car addiction and cultural co-dependency have been building since the 1920s. Cars are not essential—they are simply embedded in our culture and identities.
- Spending more money on commuter convenience neglects the needs of low - income people for efficient local service mass transit—they simply can't afford car payments, fuel, insurance and maintenance.
- Building more highways and making car travel easier will encourage a continued “lazy” form of transportation where frequent, spontaneous trips fill the highways unnecessarily.
- Cars and trucks are environmental disasters, polluting our air and covering more and more land with blacktop and concrete.

Likely Tradeoffs

- Increased investment in freeways will sustain a strong economy in the Bay Area EVEN THOUGH many low-income people will continue to struggle with inefficient mass transit systems.
- Car travel will be faster and more efficient EVEN THOUGH more freeways will increase urban sprawl and the creation of even more car dependency.

Approach 2: Make Mass Transit the Efficient Alternative

Mass transit is the only truly efficient alternative to gridlock. Mass transit systems are increasingly fuel-efficient. Mass transit infrastructure is created to serve all people equally. Mass transit has many different faces, capacities and costs. This approach recognizes that efficiency can only be through the continued development of our mass transit systems, especially now when our unhealthy dependence on the car is threatening the environment and is widening the gap between the rich and poor in our society. It recognizes as well that mass transit that is not coordinated misses the goal of efficiency. This is a critical time to marshal additional resources to build new mass transit systems and to coordinate all mass transit for greater and greater efficiency.

What Can Be Done?

- Consolidate all existing mass transportation systems into one “metropolitan-style” district under one authority to address the needs of the whole region, eliminating competition for limited funds
- Coordinate best practices learning throughout the transportation system
- Subsidize mass transit with increased taxes on commuter and recreational car use, keeping the cost of mass transit low and getting more cars off the highways

- Create a single ticket fare card system for all mass transit modes
- Improve mass transit connections for easier use
- Create a clearinghouse of transportation information with customized instructions for specific departure and arrival positions across the SF Bay Area
- Create new light-rail systems for micro-regions and then connect them all with heavy-rail, BART, buses and ferries
- Communicate clearly about current and planned projects that will alleviate traffic paralysis through local media, Internet sites, public forums, etc., and about opportunities to participate in transportation planning processes
- Create a media campaign with broad support from government, business, foundations and community groups to challenge the “car culture” and the auto industry that keeps people dependent on their cars
- Tax parking lots; add a surcharge to gasoline; add a tax for all car purchases and transfers; convert heavily used freeways into toll ways—then invest in mass transit efficiency to relieve crowding on freeways without building more lanes
- Create tax incentives to reduce car use—tax-deductible mass transit expenses; pre-tax payroll deduction for mass transit cost; matching government funds for employer mass transit benefits
- Purchase faster buses and create bus-only lanes for express service
- Invest in more high-speed ferries with terminals connected to other transit modes

In Support

- The job of creating and maintaining a “big picture” plan for mass transportation in the Bay Area is assigned to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), but the MTC has no decision or operational authority. Consolidation of strategic planning and coordination of operations among mass transit modes will increase efficiency in dramatic ways.
- Mass transit expansion and increases in mass transit efficiency are social justice issues, creating equal access for all people to education, services and jobs. Low-income persons spend an inordinate amount of time on inefficient and uncoordinated systems, helping to keep them trapped in low paying jobs.
- People who use mass transit find it to be a more relaxing way to get to work.
- Mass transit is environmentally friendly, making it possible for our transit decisions to increase the quality of life and to enhance our physical health.
- Mass transit efficiency increases dramatically when adequate funding is available for research and development—more money will really make mass transit more efficient.
- Increased ferry service utilizes the bay as a part of mass transit infrastructure rather than seeing it as a barrier to travel.

In Opposition

- Interests are too diverse for consolidation to work. Counties rely on federal transportation funding and will not give up that control. Local communities will always focus on their own interests and won’t compromise with others.

- Commuters won't use mass transit today in hopes that someday it will be convenient, efficient and affordable.
- Bay Area geography will always be a barrier to efficient mass transit—it just won't provide a viable option to highway use.
- A healthy economy needs efficient truck commerce—mass transit cannot deliver merchandise to stores.
- The “car culture” is big business with billions of dollars invested. A shift to mass transit would require an enormous reinvestment in alternative forms with similar financial returns guaranteed.
- Most people are not overly dependent on their cars. In fact, most would probably quit their car commutes immediately if timely, efficient and affordable mass transit could actually deliver on its promises.

Likely Tradeoffs

- Increased efficiency in mass transit will benefit those who are close to transit hubs EVEN THOUGH those people who don't live close to a hub will be stuck on deteriorating freeways and roads.
- Individuals will increasingly use public transportation and begin to wean themselves from their cars EVEN THOUGH they will feel that they've lost some of their independence in the process.

Approach 3: Create a Multi-Modal, Transportation-Wise Culture

The transportation system isn't broken—it's not being used wisely as an integrated part of our public lifestyle. This decentralized approach recognizes that we are not a transportation-smart culture. “Smart communities” are being built where stores, basic services and transportation hubs are integrated into housing developments with great success. A transportation-smart culture seeks to minimize non-essential transportation. In addition, a transportation-smart culture is committed to a multi-modal transportation lifestyle. Currently, no public effort exists to prepare young people to make wise transportation decisions. This approach sees gridlock as a lifestyle consequence. Too many Bay Area businesses and residents are still locked into a self-defeating behavior pattern with non-essential commuting and a very limited range of transportation modes ever being considered for use.

What Can Be Done?

- Create a Bay Area lobbying effort to reshape housing development into more commute-sensitive projects, such as live-work communities, self-contained communities and key density projects (high- and low-density)
- Provide tax incentives to encourage businesses to utilize work techniques that do not require so much commuting, like telecommuting and satellite offices
- Change “drivers' education” to “transportation education” in public schools
- Create a media campaign to encourage a multi-modal lifestyle

- Encourage public schools to take field trips so students can actually experience a variety of transportation modes
- Initiate public health research with government and foundation funding to increase public awareness of the real costs of long commutes in time losses from enriching family and community life, and in mental, physical and emotional health problems
- Encourage shared ownership of cars through tax incentives
- Provide more spaces on mass transit for those who ride bicycles at each end of their commute
- Encourage businesses and government agencies to offer flex-time work schedules to allow for travel by various modes of transportation and at various times of day
- Invest tax dollars in urban redevelopment to provide affordable housing near jobs and shopping
- Create a dedicated motorcycle lane to increase their safety and speed, making motorcycle travel more attractive
- Hire and train customer education consultants with multi-modal focus in all transportation agencies
- Provide “frequent user” incentives for multi-modal consumers
- Position “transportation ombudsmen” in all major transportation hubs for continued system-wide learning
- Inform people about the “green” alternatives with great environmental benefits
- Use public funds for print ads and media broadcast about transportation options

In Support

- “Smart communities” have succeeded in encouraging multi-modal transportation patterns by making diverse modes easily accessible and user-friendly.
- Many people don’t use mass transit modes of transportation today, because they are uninformed or misinformed about current schedules and connections. If they knew some simple facts, they could quickly become multi-modal travelers.
- Shared ownership of cars at each end of commute routes and in urban areas provides flexibility and is cost-efficient.
- Businesses that have experimented with telecommuting and flex-time work schedules have found their employees are more productive, experience less illness due to stress or exhaustion and stay in their jobs longer.
- It takes a promising culture to replace a failing culture—the car culture has failed to support our need for efficient transportation, and a multi-modal transportation culture shows the greatest promise.
- Many people would diversify their transportation habits and patterns if they had someone to help them learn how to create a unique travel plan for each specific event or need.

In Opposition

- It’s too late! Businesses are not going to move and neither are the workers—systemic change is impossible at this late stage of development.

- People know how to take a bus or train—they don't want to! People have been conditioned to treasure personal privacy, personal space and personal choice.
- Few businesses are willing to experiment with telecommuting or flex-time in this highly competitive economy.
- A cultural shift is a long-term solution, but we need relief now!
- “Smart communities” still need trucks to deliver merchandise—trucks need highways.
- Bay Area transportation is too diverse for education to make a difference. It cannot be easily understood or taught.

Likely Tradeoffs

- Communication and education would help enough people to change their transportation habits to be effective EVEN THOUGH it won't work for everyone.
- Over time, people, business and politics will adjust to the declining reliance on the car once alternative modes of transportation are proven to be reliable and affordable EVEN THOUGH it won't be either quick or easy.