

San Francisco Office
312 Sutter Street, Suite 510
San Francisco, CA 94108
(415) 543-6771

January 12, 2015

Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Attn: Amy Rein Worth, Chair; Dave Cortese, Vice Chair; and Commissioners
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607

RE: Public Participation Plan for Plan Bay Area 2017

Dear Chair Worth, Vice Chair Cortese, and Commissioners:

Greenbelt Alliance is the champion of the places that make the Bay Area special. For more than fifty years, we have defended natural and agricultural landscapes from sprawl development while helping create great cities and neighborhoods to make our region an even better place to live.

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the draft Public Participation Plan for Plan Bay Area 2017. We strongly support Plan Bay Area, MTC and ABAG's regional strategy for creating sustainable communities throughout the Bay Area. The plan, adopted in 2013, establishes a "no sprawl" vision for the region and lays out important actions to advance social equity, increase our region's economic competitiveness, and promote environmental stewardship. The 2017 update to Plan Bay Area is an opportunity to build upon the strong foundation created in 2013. A high-quality Public Participation Plan will set the stage for an impactful update.

There are many positive elements to the draft Public Participation Plan, including notable improvements from the Participation Plan for the 2013 Plan Bay Area. In particular, we are pleased that the draft Participation Plan more clearly identifies opportunities for public input and key decision points with details about timeframe, process, and the respective decision maker(s). Additionally, we strongly support the draft plan's commitment to contract and partner with community-based organizations to improve outreach to low-income residents, people of color, and those needing translation services.

We have identified three key areas in the draft Public Participation Plan that need improvement. The Participation Plan should do a better job of (1) making the regional plan relevant, (2) engaging Bay Area residents where they are, and (3) harnessing technology to reach broader audiences.

MAKING THE REGIONAL PLAN RELEVANT

Plan Bay Area advances initiatives to increase housing and transportation choices, create healthier communities, and strengthen our economy. Yet some Bay Area residents struggle to understand how a plan for the entire metropolitan region can improve the quality of life in their city and town. Therefore, there should be strong emphasis placed on showing how Plan Bay Area is meaningful at the local scale and how the plan can have a positive local impact. For example, there should be significant focus on how Plan Bay Area reflects what cities and towns are already doing to encourage smart development patterns through neighborhood-scale community-based plans.

To make the regional plan relevant to all participants, public involvement needs to be a key component of all stages of the Plan Bay Area update process. This necessitates including public participation in early stages of plan development, particularly the development of land use and transportation scenarios. Additionally, at all relevant opportunities ABAG/MTC staff should clearly articulate how public feedback will be used and report afterwards how it was incorporated into the final plan.

ENGAGING BAY AREA RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Many “Public Participation Techniques” in the overall draft Public Participation Plan look promising, especially partnering, contracting, and co-sponsoring with community-based organizations. We are also pleased that the draft plan emphasizes non-traditional workshop formats, includes public polling, and suggests using an Ambassador Approach to reaching out to under-represented groups.

To ensure that the 2017 Plan Bay Area reflects the needs of the region and builds community support for strong implementation, the draft plan should include listening sessions with a broad array of stakeholders (small business representatives, elderly, youth, etc.). These listening sessions will provide an opportunity for ABAG/MTC staff and commissioners to hear about the needs, priorities, and concerns of constituents. These sessions should occur in the community, during regularly-scheduled events, to make participation as easy as possible. These meetings should include an emphasis on under-represented constituents, as they are disproportionately impacted by many of the issues addressed in the plan, including housing costs and environmental pollution.

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY TO REACH BROADER AUDIENCES

The draft Public Participation Plan should more explicitly describe how it will use civic engagement technology. While Plan Bay Area’s website (planbayarea.org) is well designed, it should be responsively designed—able to detect device type and internet speed and improve the user experience accordingly to maximize participation. For

example, currently, to join Plan Bay Area's mailing list, you need to email, call, or fill out the form at the very bottom of the "Get Involved" tab. Signing up to receive updates about Plan Bay Area should be the most obvious button on both MTC and Plan Bay Area websites.

In addition, technology should help expand outreach far beyond the Plan Bay Area website and email list. Notice for special meetings should be much more robust, including social media and email lists. MTC should be creative in encouraging people to follow their social media accounts through a visionary advertising campaign, retweeting, and/or sharing other interesting content. Additionally, outreach should include a text messaging strategy to engage the many Bay Area residents who have cell phones but do not regularly access the internet. (Organizations like Textizen, a San Francisco-based company spun off from Code for America, could assist in this realm.)

Overall, this draft Public Participation Plan for the 2017 Plan Bay Area represents a strong improvement over previous plans. With the inclusion of our recommendations for making the regional plan more relevant, better engaging Bay Area residents where they are, and harnessing technology to reach broader audiences, the 2017 update of Plan Bay Area can be even more representative of the diverse voices and aspirations of our region. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,



Matt Vander
Program Director
Greenbelt Alliance