



5 August 2020

Association of Bay Area Governments &
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street
San Francisco 94105

in care of: info@planbayarea.org
copy to: tmcmillan@bayareametro.gov

Re: Sierra Club comments on draft Blueprint, Plan Bay Area (PBA) 2050

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Blueprint. The Sierra Club appreciates the opportunity to improve the long range planning process for the benefit of the environment and the residents of the Bay Area.

The draft asks “what requirements must the plan meet?”—

Among many statutory requirements, the Plan must be fiscally constrained and rely on reasonably expected revenues; it must meet or exceed a 19 percent per-capita GHG reduction target for light-duty vehicles by 2035; and it must plan for sufficient housing at all income levels.

This letter will address, among other things, meeting the GHG target and the production of sufficient housing.

First, though, there does not seem to be any discussion of the state-required Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) in the draft. There should be, as the SCS would help with both the GHG target and the creation of adequate regional housing. The first two Sustainable Communities Strategies adopted by ABAG and MTC were too weak to be considered successful by the Air Resources Board. It is important for Plan Bay Area 2050’s SCS to meet the ARB’s expectations.

As noted, one of the requirements for Plan Bay Area 2050 is that per capita Greenhouse Gas emissions from the driving of cars and light trucks be reduced by 19% by 2035 from the base year of 2005. The draft indicates that the reduction

achieved will not be sufficient, with the reduction being either only 9% or 12%, depending on the cost of driving. This is a significant failure of the projects and programs set out in the draft Blueprint. The final Blueprint must do much better.

The Sierra Club very much wants the expenditure of more than \$463 billion in PBA 2050 to be equitable for everyone, regardless of income and ethnicity. The “overarching finding” set out in the draft is discouraging and shows that more is needed:

The Draft Blueprint strategies excel in ensuring future growth is more equitable and resilient than past generations. However, righting the wrongs of the 20th century would require even bolder action.

We believe bold actions can and should be taken to make Plan Bay Area 2050 equitable for all Bay Area residents. We are encouraged that MTC and ABAG are looking for input—

We look forward to getting input from elected officials, the public, and stakeholder organizations on equitable and resilient strategies to advance the Plan Vision of an affordable, connected, diverse, healthy, and vibrant Bay Area.

But both commitment and action are needed.

GHG Target

One of the key challenges set out in the draft is worth a review:

Key Challenge for Final Blueprint: How can new or expanded strategies better address traffic congestion and transit overcrowding?

Transit overcrowding is definitely worth managing. But what is intended to be done if post-Covid transit service and ridership do not reach full recovery? However, why is the draft paying any attention to addressing traffic congestion, given a state requirement (SB 743) that makes the reduction of vehicle miles traveled a key factor (and not level of service, or congestion)? Here is informative language from the Office of Planning and Research:

SB 743 (Steinberg, 2013) updates the way transportation impacts are measured in California for new development projects, making sure they are built in a way that allows Californians more options to drive less. This change will help us achieve our climate commitments, preserve our environment, improve our health and safety--particularly for our most vulnerable residents--and boost our economy by prioritizing co-located jobs, services, and housing. It will also reduce the time we need to spend in our cars to get places and provide more choices for how we travel, which will help to promote business, provide access to opportunity, and

improve the quality of life across our state. (<https://opr.ca.gov/ceqa/updates/sb-743/>)

We ask if funding could be redirected from attempting to reduce traffic congestion to reducing transit overcrowding, or to other areas, to move the Blueprint to success in achieving the 19% GHG reduction target.

A document supporting the draft is “Plan Bay Area 2050 Final Blueprint: Key Decisions for the Transportation Element.” Attachment B has a list of projects and programs to be funded with Plan Bay Area 2050. Several (eg, “I-80/I-680/SR-12 Interchange + Widening”) have an asterisk by their titles that indicates the projects will be included “...only if on-system GHG mitigations are identified by sponsor by September 2020.” But this is after the comment period available for the draft. Hopefully these highway capacity expansion projects will not be built, and the funds identified for them will be shifted to projects and programs that could help get to the 19% GHG target and work towards achieving equity for all residents. Indeed, the draft asks about another Key Challenge, “How do we close the GHG gap in a sustainable and equitable manner?”

The draft also states, “Additional transit strategies proposed for the Final Blueprint may help close that gap slightly, through highway and express lane strategies that increased road capacity will likely induce more driving, moving the Final Blueprint in the opposite direction of the 19 percent per-capita target.” This supports shifting funds away from projects adding to roadway capacity to other projects and programs.

A recent decision by the California Court of Appeals (“Golden Door Properties v. County of San Diego” and “Sierra Club v. County of San Diego”) addresses carbon offsets and mitigating emissions. A link to the court’s decision is contained in this note by Legal Planet, a publication of the UC Berkeley and UCLA law schools <https://legal-planet.org/2020/07/24/guest-blogger-john-graham-california-court-decision-will-affect-future-use-of-carbon-offsets-to-mitigate-emissions-of-development/> .

The *Golden Door* opinion provides some limits on carbon offset programs based both on CEQA requirements and California emissions reduction strategies. In its decision, the Court suggested some best practices for development projects aiming to use carbon offsets as a GHG mitigation measure. Importantly, offsets should not constitute the majority or even the bulk of mitigation for a project. Geographically, projects should endeavor to purchase offsets generated as close to the project as possible. Finally, lead agencies should develop and apply clear, objective standards for determining when to use offsets that are not generated locally. These principles are likely to influence whether and how California development projects may use carbon offsets in the future – with courts continuing to look carefully at whether offsets are consistent with California’s long-term climate goals.

The GHG mitigations referenced in the draft may no longer be viable in view of the *Golden Door* decision. How will PBA 2050 address this problem?

Housing

Last year, the Sierra Club adopted an Infill Policy (<https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/sce-authors/u19041/SClub%20Infill%20Policy%202019-05-18.pdf>) that states, “The Sierra Club believes affordable housing is a human right.” Our Infill Policy also supports “access to education, services, amenities, and recreation that improve overall quality of life.”

The Sierra Club encourages ABAG and MTC to work towards equity and hopes our input in this letter helps improve the results, both of the GHG reduction target and of equity.

The draft Blueprint states, “...many Transit-Rich areas are at risk of gentrification, as the Blueprint forecasts an increasing wealthy demographic profile.” Further, “Low-income residents continue to be at a high risk of displacement, especially in Communities of Concern; robust renter protections do not provide meaningful long-term relief.”

The draft also adds another “Key Challenge for Final Blueprint: How can we reduce risk of displacement so more residents can remain in place?” Furthermore, “...hundreds of thousands of existing low-income residents would still lack a permanently affordable place to live (by 2050).”

The “Housing Strategies” set out in the draft are a first step, but as noted in it, they are inadequate to achieving equity. Further, the Blueprint focuses on making Priority Development Areas and other transit “rich” areas successful, but more is needed. This means, of course, among other things, making sure adequate affordable housing is built within these areas to meet residential demand. The draft is looking at 10% to 20% of new housing to be affordable; is that low range adequate to the needs of the Bay Area, especially with the current unemployment crisis?

The draft’s Attachment C notes, “...housing strategies in the Draft Blueprint may bring housing to job-rich areas such as Silicon Valley, but strategies to move jobs to housing-rich areas are not sufficient.” The common practice whereby permitting authorities approve employment projects with the implicit assumption that other authorities will provide the requisite housing needs to be brought under control. This can be done by constraining permitting authorities from doing so. Existing Jobs/Housing imbalances may not be possible to fully cure, but it would be folly to allow or encourage permitting authorities to continue to exacerbate the dire situation.

Our Infill Policy also supports “access to education, services, amenities, and recreation that improve overall quality of life.” The agencies should review the transit-rich areas to make sure these quality of life assets are in place.

ABAG and MTC have a lot of authority, and ought to determine if the draft housing strategies can be significantly improved with stronger actions. Achieving equity simply cannot be put off until after 2050.

Other

We also note a number of additional subject areas that should be addressed and resolved in the Blueprint and PBA 2050:

All Complete Streets projects in the Bay Area should be advanced as quickly as possible, to cut down on driving (and related GHGs) and make the transit-rich areas even more successful.

Transit service in the transit-rich areas should be reviewed and where inadequate, improved as soon as possible. There are a number of Priority Development Areas, for instance, that do not have the minimum transit service frequency.

The Valley Link proposed passenger rail project from San Joaquin County to the BART station in Dublin is problematic. The amount shown in the draft is from \$1 billion to \$2.5 billion. This project facilitates interregional commuting, something that is concerning regarding a successful SCS. Should not the funds go instead to benefiting Bay Area residents? Also, even if people driving today from San Joaquin County into the Bay Area switched to the train, has San Joaquin County taken steps to stop housing production in that county for people commuting to the Bay Area? Otherwise, won't the freeway over the Alamont Pass just continue to be a big GHG generator? If someone works in the Bay Area, shouldn't they be able to live here as SB 375 encourages and not have to relocate to the Central Valley?

The Sierra Club is deeply disappointed with the unsubstantiated change made to revenue forecasts at MTC's July 22 meeting to move "MegaMeasure" funds to the first 15-year Tranche of PBA 2050, apparently for the sole purpose of advancing some political "pet projects." We look forward to credible documentation of how these actions will improve equity, mobility, and quality of life for Bay Area residents, while having the Plan and its outcomes be truly and reasonably fiscally constrained.

With the draft's projected increase of "work from home" going from six percent to fourteen percent, and with schools providing instruction via computers in homes, has there been a review of the adequacy of Internet access in residential areas? For low income residents, has a plan been considered to provide them with computers and wifi access? As noted in the July 28th MetroTalks, this can also help enhance public engagement.

There is a growing concern about wildfires in California. The draft addresses sea level rise flooding and earthquakes, but will either the Blueprint or PBA 2050 consider wildfires and housing and transportation developments in areas prone to wildfires?

As to sea level rise, the potential impacts of sea level rise on the Bay Area by 2050 are projected to be worsening as scientists learn more about the accelerating ice melt. Individual cities and counties are incapable of addressing this threat by themselves. A coordinated planning effort is needed, if nothing else, to understand the probable loss of housing, waste treatment facilities, and industry and transportation infrastructure if a concerted effort is not undertaken. This is not a mere theory anymore. Is the projected rise provided in the draft being reevaluated?

Since the population is expected to increase significantly through 2050, have the agencies reviewed resource adequacy, such as sufficient domestic water supply and adequate sewage treatment capacity?

Conclusion

Key Decisions for the Transportation Element states, “The additional strategies in the Final Blueprint would invest in the region’s freeways and commuter rail systems, which currently primarily benefit higher-income non-minority residents.” Clearly, this would not move the Bay Area in an equitable direction. What do the agencies plan to do to shift funds from these types of projects to other projects and programs that will help meet the GHG target and achieve regional equity?

The Bay Area is a wealthy place and it should be possible, with changes in the draft Blueprint, to have a regional plan that has a successful Sustainable Communities Strategy and is equitable for all residents. Please improve the Blueprint and its outcomes.

If you have any questions about our letter, please contact Matt Williams of our San Francisco Bay Chapter at mwillia@mac.com. The Sierra Club thanks you for your consideration.

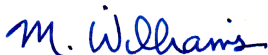
Sincerely,



Steve Birdlebough
Redwood Chapter & Sierra Club California Executive Committee



Michael J. Ferreira
Loma Prieta Chapter Executive Committee



Matt Williams
San Francisco Bay Chapter & Sierra Club California Executive Committee

cc: California Air Resources Board
Sierra Club California