



August 23, 2010

Scott Haggerty, Chair, and Commissioners
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
101 Eighth Street, Oakland, CA 94607

Dear Chair Haggerty,

Re: Draft Public Participation Plan

Throughout the League of Women Voters' 90-year history, our guiding purpose has been to educate and encourage our fellow citizens to participate in governmental affairs. We have worked diligently to find ways of making information accessible and desirable to all, including publishing an Easy Reader Voter Guide that presents information about candidates and issues in language easily understood by persons with limited knowledge of English. Our comments on the draft Public Participation Plan that follow are based, in part, on this experience.

First: "strive to communicate in plain language" (Strategy #2 for the Plan)

This is one of the most important, and possibly the most difficult strategy of all to accomplish. It is very likely that MTC staff and Commissioners, steeped in acronyms, process, and numerical references to MTC resolutions and legislation, are not among those best equipped to tackle this challenge. We strongly recommend two approaches: 1) enlist the services of a writer from outside the transportation field to draft the communications to potential participants, and 2) find a person in one or more of the targeted communities to read the drafts and point out any words, paragraphs, or thoughts that are incomprehensible to him or her. If communications are difficult to comprehend, participation by the very communities to be targeted will be discouraged.

Second: Explain the basics

Not only the language, but the nuts and bolts of transportation planning must be laid bare and related to the wants and needs of the audiences. It is not sufficient to simply chart the progress from RTP to TIP and STIP – new participants need to know why they should care about this. For example: people need to know that the projects they may

want and need to be funded must be in the RTP. They need to know that the scheduling of projects in the RTP, which is generally relegated to a lengthy and difficult appendix at the end of the plans, is vital information to participants if they are to truly grasp the implications of the plans. To many who need a bus now for work or school, the prospect of a bus in 20 years is not likely to seem adequate.

Third: Gain and maintain the trust of participants

If the Plan is successful, many Bay Area residents will participate for the first time in the planning process. To ensure that misunderstandings do not erode their trust that the process is fair and transparent, we urge that the Plan be modified as follows::

§ Avoid generalizations such as the statement that “minor revisions” to the RTP or TIP, or “technical revisions without significant impact on the cost, scope, or schedule of a project” can be made administratively. The extent of “minor revisions” and the meaning of “significant impact” must be made clear to avoid misunderstandings.

MTC should describe, quantitatively and qualitatively, the extent to which revisions are to be considered minor – and where exceptions are to be allowed. For example, the recent exchanges of funding between roads and the Oakland Airport Connector were made without opportunities for public input, and with no realization by the public or by many Commissioners that agreements were in place for such staff actions. Any appearance of back-room deals will quickly erode confidence in the process.

§ Opportunities for participation in decisions made at the CMAs will be important to building trust. In the past, CMA-recommended projects have been made part of the RTP without the kind of public participation discussed in the Plan. Newly- engaged participants will not experience the process as participatory if this way of working continues, and few will be willing or able to follow the development of the RTP in two or more agencies at two or more locations. How will the work of the CMA be incorporated into the Plan for Public Participation, since it is such an integral part of the regional process?

§ In initial meetings with community members, MTC should make clear when, how, and how often they will be asked for their input. The Plan specifies “key decision points,” but does not define these points. It is important that community participants know that they will have opportunities to weigh in on the important decisions that will make a difference to them.

Fourth: Listen, as well as speak to participants

The Plan describes in detail the process of involving new participants. But MTC staff and Commissioners need to learn from, as well as inform, the communities of their constituents. Outreach will be effective to the extent that participants feel that decision-makers hear and understand their transportation needs, and that meeting their needs will be a priority in the planning process. Discussions, as well as surveys, will be vital to this process. Further, MTC should document what has been heard from the public so that all participants have a common understanding.

Fifth: Emphasize outcomes and evaluations

The Plan specifies that written comments will receive responses. But it is likely that community meetings and public comment at MTC meetings will generate a host of comments and recommendations. A method is needed to respond to oral comments, as well as written. Discussions that include both staff and Commissioners are particularly vital when participants' recommendations have not been adopted. The responses should indicate, substantively, why a suggestion from the public is being accepted or rejected. A simple "Thank you for your comment" would be inadequate.

The questions outlined in the draft Plan to survey participants' satisfaction with their involvement in the planning process do not sufficiently take into account their opinions and feelings. We recommend adding questions such as the following:

Do you feel your opinions were taken seriously?

Do you think your needs were well understood?

Do you think good-faith efforts were made to meet your transportation needs?

What recommendations would you make to improve the public participation process for the next update of the Regional Transportation Plan?

Thank you for your work to ensure equity and fairness in both the process and the outcomes of your planning efforts.

Sincerely,

Marion Taylor, President

CC: MTC Advisory Council