

Back to the Future: Regional Gridlock and Local Planning Paralysis

Summary

The lack of integrative planning between the Regional Transportation Commission and the planning departments of the county and cities has resulted in deplorable traffic congestion along the Highway 1 corridor on a daily basis. The Regional Transportation Commission has noted that one of the fundamental reasons for the congestion is a lack of consensus among the political stakeholders. The County, which is responsible for the unincorporated areas, and the cities have chosen *not* to integrate their transportation plans with those provided by the Regional Transportation Commission. Therefore, the Grand Jury recommends the transportation sections of all general plans for the county and cities should be written by the Regional Transportation Commission.

Definitions

- **AB 32:** Assembly Bill 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006.
- **AMBAG:** The Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments. A 24-member board of directors comprised of elected officials from each city and county within the region from Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties. AMBAG serves as a federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization and Council of Governments, and is responsible for regional collaboration and problem solving. Membership and participation is voluntary.
- **Caltrans:** California Department of Transportation.
- **RTP:** Regional Transportation Plan.
- **SCCRTC (RTC):** Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. The commission is made up of the five county supervisors, one member from each of the four incorporated cities in the County and three members appointed by the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District Board of Directors. Caltrans serves as a non-voting member of the commission. The RTC responsibilities include ensuring improved mobility, access and air quality; allocating funding for the transportation system; setting priorities for transportation infrastructure; and conducting programs to encourage the use of alternative transportation. The RTC develops comprehensive transportation plans for Santa Cruz County.
- **SB 375:** Senate Bill 375, passed in 2008, enhancing the ability to reach the goals promoted by AB 32.

Background

The Grand Jury initially investigated the fiscal impacts of the proposed acquisition of the rail line through Santa Cruz County by the RTC. During the course of the investigation, we found evidence that very little coordination existed between the local jurisdictions and the RTC in the development of the transportation and housing elements of general plans. Development of the general plans by local jurisdictions has ostensibly ignored the detailed Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) developed by the RTC.^[1]

The population of Santa Cruz County has grown significantly in the past four decades, from 123,790 in 1970^[2] to 262,382^[3] in 2010. Improvements to the primary transportation corridor of Highway 1 have not kept up with the population growth, resulting in congested traffic conditions between the cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Although alternative means of addressing this quagmire have been discussed, no coordinated plan has been implemented by any of the local jurisdictions.

The local jurisdictions are not accepting the transporting planning leadership provided by the RTC. The RTC has produced the most robust and comprehensive regional transportation plan to date,^[1] but the other jurisdictions, such as the County of Santa Cruz^[4] and cities of Santa Cruz,^[5] Capitola,^[6] Watsonville,^[7] and Scotts Valley^[8] appear to be operating in a vacuum, without regard to how well their plans integrate with the RTP.^[1] This lack of integration across transportation plans has obstructed the implementation of the improvements to the transportation corridors that will alleviate current conditions.

Scope

The Grand Jury interviewed personnel of various planning departments, agencies, and local organizations. Although the interviews were unscripted, we did ask three key questions listed below at each interview:

- What, in your opinion, should be done with the railroad acquisition in the long-term?
- How will this affect our long-term population distribution, business location and traffic patterns?
- Which agency, in your opinion, should be developing and EXECUTING long-term development plans in order to take advantage of the railroad acquisition?

The Grand Jury observed that there was a broader issue regarding coordination of transportation planning between the local jurisdictions and the RTC. Our focus was subsequently redirected to an investigation of this lack of coordination.

Investigation

There is little disagreement that the current major transportation arteries of Santa Cruz County are congested during specific windows of time during the day. This condition will worsen in the future as the aggregate population of the county continues to grow. From the 2010 RTP:^[1]

Many drivers complain about regularly being stuck in traffic. In a September 2007 RTC poll of likely Santa Cruz County voters “traffic and transportation” tied with “affordable housing/low income housing/cost of living” as the most important problem in the region. Area residents pay for traffic congestion in a number of ways including wasted time, increased air pollution, higher stress levels, fewer visitor dollars, and the apparent trend toward more aggressive driving habits. As we plan our transportation system for the next 25 years, addressing the seemingly intractable problem of traffic congestion is one of our key challenges.

The overarching causes of this problem are straightforward - an increasing number of drivers, a relative decrease in the rate at which transportation projects are being funded and constructed,

and an ongoing lack of consensus for how to deal with congestion issues. Again, from the 2010 RTP:^[1]

There are three fundamental reasons why traffic congestion is a major issue in the county, as well as elsewhere in the state and nation. First, more people are driving more miles than ever before and per person vehicle registrations are at an all time high. Second, decreases in the amount of transportation funding available for local projects has meant that our investment in transportation facilities and services has not kept pace with growing demands for road space and transportation alternatives. Third, there has been a lack of consensus on how to invest in our transportation system. To effectively improve mobility for all Santa Cruz County residents, it is useful to understand each of these factors.

We gathered background information in an attempt to understand the possible long-term implications of the railroad purchase in the initial stages of the investigation. While looking into the environmental and fiscal impacts of different modes of transportation in the county, we also reviewed the procedural differences of transportation planning among the different jurisdictional agencies, including the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission,^[1] County of Santa Cruz Planning Department,^[4] City of Santa Cruz Planning Department,^[5] City of Capitola Community Development Department,^[6] City of Watsonville Community Development Department,^[7] and the City of Scotts Valley Planning Department.^[8]

Many of our initial interviews highlighted the importance of Assembly Bill 32^[9] and Senate Bill 375,^[10] both of which make a distinct link between the integrated planning for housing and transportation. Many of those interviewed felt that the first passed bill, AB 32 (Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006),^[9] was too weak with respect to punitive consequences for jurisdictions that did not comply with the objectives of the bill.

SB 375^[10] was passed in 2008, enhancing the ability to reach the goals promoted by AB 32,^[9] which included long range development planning that endeavored to create more sustainable communities. The bill sets timeline targets for both 2020 and 2035 for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles. AMBAG is currently working on producing a regional planning blueprint that incorporates the goals of SB 375 and AB 32 (Envisioning the Monterey Bay Area: A Blueprint for Sustainable Growth and Smart Infrastructure)^[11]. Some interviewees stated local county and city agencies have delayed updating their transportation plans in anticipation of the production of a guiding regional planning blueprint by AMBAG. The RTC is the only county agency that has completed a comprehensive regional transportation plan^[1] that already incorporates most of the goals of both bills, ahead of final production of the AMBAG “Blueprint.”

In reviewing general plans for both the county^[4] and the four incorporated cities^{[5][6][7][8]} within the county, as well as the 2010 RTP,^[1] we observed no evidence of integrated planning between appropriate entities. For example, none of the existing general plans have substantively incorporated transportation elements outlined in the RTP.^[1] It appears conflicting, narrowly defined policy objectives are the reason for this lack of integrated planning. As stated in the 2010 RTP:^[1]

Given the reality of limited funds & the delicate balance between benefits and impacts of major and minor projects, strong disagreements about priorities have continued to divide the community. At times, public opinion is stronger in opposition of transportation options than for them, causing a community paralysis that can inhibit compromise. This lack of agreement can make it difficult for decision makers to move forward with projects acceptable to their diverse constituencies.

A critical component for the creation and implementation of transportation plans is a reliable source of funding. When the 2010 RTP^[1] was created, the RTC assumed that a half-cent sales tax would be approved by 2012.^[1] Their reasoning was that 84% of the population in California live in areas which have approved local funding measures to address their transportation needs. Sales taxes require voter approval, which makes this source of funding unreliable. In addition, fluctuating economic cycles can adversely affect future revenues. The RTC has little long-term funding for future planning without this assumed funding source.

To summarize, the citizens of Santa Cruz County are burdened with bad traffic congestion along the Highway 1 corridor on a daily basis, primarily due to the fact that the number of drivers is growing, while transportation infrastructure improvements have not kept pace. This problem is driven by a lack of integrative planning and policy consensus between the RTC and the county and city legislative bodies. The RTC is clearly providing detailed and substantive long-range transportation planning guidance to the local jurisdictions. However, absent a mandate to incorporate RTC plans, local jurisdictions do not include comprehensive, up-to-date regional transportation planning within their general plans.

Findings

- F1.** Traffic congestion on Highway 1 corridor is problematic.
- F2.** Local jurisdictions do not implement the regional transportation plan created by the RTC.
- F3.** Lack of consensus between the local jurisdictions and the RTC staff obstructs the coordination of the local transportation plans with the Regional Transportation Plan.
- F4.** Each agency's General Plan is an integrated document that includes housing and transportation as elements. There is no mandated link between the local agency's General Plans and the Regional Transportation Plan.
- F5.** No consistent long-term funding source is currently available for RTC planning.

Recommendations

- R1.** Transportation sections of all county and city general plans should be written by Regional Transportation Commission staff.
- R2.** The local jurisdictions should review the transportation sections developed by RTC staff for adequacy every two years and RTC staff should be required to revise when necessary.

- R3.** The RTC should develop cost estimates and pursue stable funding sources to implement recommendations one and two.

Commendations

The Grand Jury would like to acknowledge the exceptional work the RTC has accomplished in creating, and periodically updating, comprehensive regional transportation plans. Their plans provide a framework for jurisdictions to integrate their local transportation plans with others in the county.

Responses Required

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	F1-F4	R1-R3	90 days October 1, 2011
Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission	F1-F5	R1-R3	90 Days October 1, 2011
County of Santa Cruz Planning Department	F2-F4	R1-R2	60 days September 1, 2011
City of Santa Cruz City Council	F1-F4	R1-R2	90 days October 1, 2011
City of Santa Cruz Planning Department	F2-F4	R1-R2	60 days September 1, 2011
City of Watsonville City Council	F1-F4	R1-R2	90 days October 1, 2011
Watsonville Community Development Department	F2-F4	R1-R2	60 days September 1, 2011
City of Capitola City Council	F1-F4	R1-R2	90 days October 1, 2011

Capitola Community Development Department	F2-F4	R1-R2	60 days September 1, 2011
City of Scotts Valley City Council	F1-F4	R1-R2	90 days October 1, 2011
Scotts Valley Planning Department	F2-F4	R1-R2	60 days September 1, 2011

Sources

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