

# Metropolitan Transportation Commission

## Planning Committee

April 12, 2024

Agenda Item 8a

### Exploring the Past, Present, and Future of Highways

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#### **Subject:**

Presentation highlighting relevant findings from various MTC initiatives related to future highway investments, including key policy tradeoffs related to reliability, mobility, climate, transit, and affordability.

#### **Background:**

Bay Area highways serve as the backbone of our region's transportation system, allowing people and goods to move across our nine-county region and beyond. Given that the vast majority of Bay Area residents use these grade-separated highways (also commonly referred to as freeways) at least once per week, it is critical to explore how we can best invest in this system in a manner that aligns with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century regional vision of a Bay Area that is "affordable, connected, diverse, healthy and vibrant for all." After all, while the original construction of the region's freeway network and continued highway widening projects enabled residents to travel in a personal automobile at faster speeds than had been previously imaginable, these freeways came at a cost. They did significant damage to existing communities, particularly communities of color, by dividing neighborhoods and disproportionately burdening them with severe traffic and air quality impacts. Highway construction facilitated urban sprawl and auto-dependent development patterns that impede today's efforts to improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging alternatives to driving. As we look to the future and consider how we ought to prioritize the Bay Area's limited transportation funding, thoughtfully balancing highway investments – between maintenance, modernization, and expansion – is essential for the region to move forward equitably and sustainably.

Multiple MTC initiatives have explored aspects of this question in recent years. The Express Lanes Strategic Plan (adopted in 2021) explored policy questions that had emerged since the network's approval in 2011, including the need for greater climate and equity mitigations. Plan Bay Area 2050 (adopted in 2021 and approved by CARB in 2022) initially struggled with an even more ambitious climate target than prior cycles; it actively worked to maximize funding for

transit and active transportation modes, while adding in robust pricing strategies like all-lane tolling for the first time. This sparked the ongoing Next-Generation Bay Area Freeways Study, which has been analyzing a suite of pricing strategies and engaging the public over the past two years (slated to conclude in late 2024). In the months ahead, highway policy questions are likely to continue through the development of SB 1031, the enabling legislation for a future regional transportation revenue measure (now referred to as Connect Bay Area). Furthermore, Plan Bay Area 2050+ will be making recommendations about transportation priorities in a new era of fiscal constraint – including what highway projects to prioritize – and the Next-Generation Freeways Study will debut a ten-year implementation roadmap identifying intermediate milestones toward expanded pricing through 2035.

### **Highway Investments Today and in the Decades Ahead:**

While general-purpose highway widening has become relatively rare in the Bay Area in recent years, the region still has critical needs when it comes to highways, including but not limited to pavement & bridge rehabilitation, interchange modernizations, traffic safety upgrades, goods movement facilities, express lanes, and climate resilience investments. Unlike decades past, our region's current long-range plan, Plan Bay Area 2050, only allocates three percent of future transportation revenues towards road expansion, with more than three-quarters of all funding proposed to flow toward transit, active transportation, and climate projects. While Plan Bay Area 2050 would allow for a two percent increase in road capacity through mid-century, a significant share of new lane-miles would be priced, including express lanes and State Route 37.

Despite that, the details matter regarding the path forward toward pricing. Expanding a facility to construct a new priced lane has strengths and weaknesses compared to converting an existing general-purpose lane to a tolled facility; it provides motorists with the same number of toll-free lanes and more capacity for person-throughput but poses a greater risk of increasing vehicle miles traveled. Similarly, moving toward all-lane tolling may yield much more substantial progress toward climate goals by encouraging some motorists to reduce how much they drive and generating monies to reinvest in transit options– but all-lane tolling also can create greater affordability and equity challenges without thoughtful mitigation.

### **Exploring Tradeoffs:**

**Attachment A** describes findings from this recent set of different planning initiatives to help illuminate tradeoffs between general-purpose widenings, express lane widenings, express lane conversions, and all-lane tolling – a core suite of common highway project types. While not intended to be exhaustive, the presentation looks at five key policy areas:

- **Reliability:** *Does the project provide reliable travel times when travelers need it most?*
- **Mobility:** *Does the project maximize the number of people who can get to their destination?*
- **Climate:** *Does the project align with state climate goals that require reductions in miles driven?*
- **Transit:** *Does the project integrate transit services that can grow ridership and advance equity?*
- **Affordability:** *Does the project ensure that all travelers can get where they need to go affordably?*

Last month, the MTC Policy Advisory Council provided feedback on this highways-focused exploration of policy tradeoffs. Members underscored the importance of considering equity as a key lens in the months ahead, as well as the need to use existing infrastructure more efficiently and the value of clearly conveying potential travel time savings from pricing to the public.

Members also underscored the wide range of land use contexts throughout the Bay Area, meaning that a “one size fits all” approach to transit reinvestments would not be appropriate.

Looking ahead, several key analyses are slated to be released later this year that will add further context to this policy discussion, including at the highway corridor level. The Plan Bay Area 2050+/Transit 2050+ Project Performance Assessment will include evaluations of major highway projects, including their cost-effectiveness and equity performance relative to major transit projects. Perhaps most notably, the Next-Generation Bay Area Freeways Study will release final findings to pursue an equitable and politically acceptable path forward for expanded pricing to help achieve climate goals, such as all-lane tolling.

### **Next Steps:**

Staff will return to this committee later this spring and summer with further updates on Plan Bay Area 2050+ and the Next-Generation Bay Area Freeways Study, including the aforementioned analyses, to inform critical policy decisions.

**Issues:**

None identified.

**Recommendation:**

Information.

**Attachments:**

- Attachment A: PowerPoint

  
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