

The future of MTC and ABAG
Strategies and solutions for our Bay Region

By Rebecca Kaplan

In order to ensure a healthier future for our region, the next leader of MTC and ABAG will need to deal with multiple issues, including our growing region-wide intertwined crises of homelessness and lack of affordable housing, and increasing traffic congestion with ever-lengthening commutes. Solutions are achievable, and, since the next leader of MTC/ABAG is now being selected, we should ensure that it is someone who is prepared to accomplish them.

I offer for your consideration a list of strategies. For each item, I can provide more detail about the specific needed actions, and how to implement practical solutions, based on experience and data, upon request.

1) **A significant increase in transit-accessible housing**, especially housing for our workforce and lower-income residents is required. This can be accomplished through incentives for local jurisdictions to allow increased heights, density, and reduced parking and quicker approval times for housing, including affordable housing, in transit-oriented locations. Direct funding to support jurisdictions who provide housing.

2) **Connect the gaps in our rail systems**. Taxpayers have invested billions in important rail transit systems, serving our bay region and beyond. Yet, key gaps, (e.g. between BART & ACE), reduce the effectiveness of the system as a whole. Work with rail providers, local governments and power authorities, and **connect with mega-regional partners**, to plan and deliver connections for our transit systems, reduce conflicts between passenger and freight rail, and allow for faster and more connected transit trips.

3) **Express lanes connected region-wide, increase carpooling and express bus**. Express buses can add transit service to more locations fairly quickly, and help serve more trips. In addition, one of the fastest and cheapest ways to reduce traffic congestion and help people save time, money and fuel, is to use the three empty seats travelling in most cars, by increasing carpooling. Using direct outreach, and contemporary apps to match carpool riders with drivers, we can significantly increase carpooling. To accomplish this increase in carpool and express bus, we must expand and connect our region's "Express" lanes, to incentivize their use so that carpoolers and express buses, don't get stuck in traffic congestion. We have many Express lanes, and more coming in parts of our region, which need to be better interconnected. Harmonize express lane policies and planning across the region that are now held across multiple agencies.

4) **Complete the process of the (partially completed) unification of MTC and ABAG, and unite transportation planning with land use/housing planning**. Bring together the experience base of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), with the local cities and local leadership, to address the issues of housing, planning, and zoning, and sea level rise, that are under the authority of ABAG. Create harmonized leadership structure. Combine Regional Housing Needs Assessment with Regional Transportation Plan.

5) **Fiscal solvency.** Protect and improve the bond rating and fiscal solvency, and long-term financial planning for the agency (including for the new merged agency).

6) **Expand region-wide coordination for housing and homelessness.** Provide model policy examples for allowing more flexibility in housing alternatives to rapidly re-house people in need, including "small homes," RVs, and modular construction. (After the fires in the North Bay last year, some jurisdictions amended their laws to allow wider flexibility in fast and affordable housing alternatives. These types of actions should be shared throughout our region). Expand use of public land for needed housing. Provide funding, planning, and policy support to expand these efforts and incentives for local governments who take these actions.

7) **Improve pedestrian, bicycle, and wheelchair safety, and access to bikes and scooters.** Include bicycles, scooters, pedestrians, and wheelchair use in multi-modal transportation and land use planning. Enhance bike and pedestrian safety and access programs, and design that takes these needs into consideration. Resolve outstanding issues with bike-share program, to enable implementation of e-bikes, and better regional equity. Provide model policies for shared mobility.

8) **Freight.** The consideration of freight in our regional transportation planning needs to be strengthened. The trucks, trains and ships which enable our vital goods movement throughout our region have not received the attention and planning needed, and thus, many of our trade transportation systems have been inefficient, leading to wasted time, traffic congestion, air pollution, and other negative impacts. By strengthening planning for freight movement, and working with stakeholders, we can significantly reduce negative impacts on our communities and make our freight system more efficient, saving money, time and fuel. Some options include: improved logistics, expanding hours of port gates to reduce bottlenecks, planning and funding rail improvements to connect freight rail directly to docks and other key locations, and reduce conflicts with passenger rail. Improve roadway alignment, signals, and online scheduling and information, to reduce truck backlogs, and programs to encourage and fund cleaner and more efficient engines.

9) **Improve coordination with BAAQMD.** In addition to MTC-ABAG, the Bay Area also has another regional agency overseeing air quality (BAAQMD). Since most of the Bay Area's air pollution comes from transportation sources, the work of BAAQMD also largely deals with transportation. Some of the types of projects that could do the most to improve transportation in the Bay Area, are split between BAAQMD and MTC. Improve and strengthen coordination with BAAQMD, including on specific programs with dual roles; carpool programs, electric vehicle charging station region-wide network, and truck and rail improvements.

10) **Safe routes to schools and transit access for our students.** Our young people often face challenges getting to and from school, unsafe walking paths, dangerous rail crossings, and lack of transit access. These issues can cause kids to miss school or get injured, and makes parents who have the ability to drive, feel like they should drive their kids to school, which increases congestion and pollution, and reduces healthy exercise,

and worsens the access gap for low-income families without cars. There have been successes in some schools with Safe Routes to Schools programs, improving bicycle and pedestrian safety and access around schools, and with pilot programs for bus passes for students. We should bring forth successful examples from these pilot programs, and help more schools and jurisdictions make these improvements, which help our kids get to school, and build new norms of transit, bicycling and walking for our next generation.

11) **Electric vehicle charging stations region-wide.** Together (and in partnership with BAAQMD) we should actively ensure a completed electric vehicle charging station network to allow electric vehicle travel throughout our region. Currently, most efforts to provide charging stations simply accept applications from whomever chooses to apply, but we need to also affirmatively plan for needed locations to ensure a region-wide network. We should actively map and identify gaps in the charging station network, including ensuring stations at entry points to the Bay Region, and reach out to identify locations for charging stations to ensure a complete network.

12) **RVs to help house people in need.** Recent fires combined with rising systemic displacement and homelessness have left thousands of people in urgent need of housing, with growing numbers living on sidewalks and underpasses. Together we can and should identify allowable locations for RVs and other alternatives. In addition, by uniting our housing functions with transportation functions and partners, we could combine the "cash for clunkers" program, by having a targeted program to collect RVs, and remove the more polluting ones from the road by using them to provide housing, in partnership with local jurisdictions, non-profits or others who would provide land on which to park them.

13) **Craft a regional jobs-housing balance impact fee and funding system,** and work with local governments, State, and other stakeholders to implement. For example, a fee based on jobs-housing imbalance and affordable housing production, in which jurisdictions which under-produce housing would pay into it, and the funds are used to help those who do provide it.

14) **Improve and expand fare payment unification,** including working with the "Clipper 2" process, as well as other new technologies, to expand access to universal fare payment, and to ease transit connectivity, expand bulk discount pass sales (e.g. through employers, schools, housing developments). Harmonize fare systems for easier region-wide transit use. Include multiple modes (e.g. shared mobility, parking).

15) **Ferries.** Our Ferry system could greatly increase frequency and capacity to be able to serve more riders, including with strengthened outreach and partnerships for connected trips. Thanks to new funding such as RM3, we have the opportunity to make sure to effectively implement more ferry usage for our region, and this can help ease pressure throughout our other transportation systems.

16) Improve **oversight of important large projects** to help identify and catch problems, and ensure better solutions, such as bay bridge and trans-bay terminal. Help ensure engineering needs are not undermined.

17) **BART new train cars and systems.** Help ensure timely funding and support of BART improvements, including new train cars and control systems.

18) **Efficiency of bus transit.** Bus transit is a cost-effective and flexible method to expand transit access in many locations, but traffic congestion, fare payment boarding delays, and other inefficiencies exist. Need to enhance projects, inter-agency coordination, and planning, for solutions such as express lanes, transit signal prioritization, coordinating city streetscape design with transit planning, region-wide fare strategy and fare payment methods, and more.

19) **All-nighter bus system and example of working together.** The Bay Area now has transit service all night while BART is closed, thanks to the launch of all-nighter system, which united multiple transit agencies and cities and counties, to plan together timing, transfer locations, and more, to provide transit after midnight. After proposing this service, and getting it funded (in RM2), we worked together across multiple agencies to plan and deliver this service. It is helping workers, visitors, and more get around our region, and involved uniting decision-making across numerous separate agencies that should be an example for solving many other vital regional needs.

Thank you for your consideration.

About the Author:

Rebecca Kaplan serves as the Oakland City Councilmember At-Large, representing a large and diverse constituency in the heart of the Bay region. Kaplan has served as Chair of the Alameda County Transportation Commission (ACTC), Board member of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD), Executive Board member of ABAG, elected Board member for AC Transit, State Assembly legislative aide, and at the Bay Area Transportation and Land Use Coalition.

Kaplan holds a Bachelor's degree from M.I.T., Master's in Urban and Environmental Policy from Tufts University, and J.D. from Stanford Law School.