

Metropolitan Transportation Commission

Policy Advisory Council

March 22, 2024

Agenda Item 7a

Exploring the Past, Present, and Future of Highways

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 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 21st century policy goals. After all, the legacy of the 20th century – of new highways and continued general-purpose highway widening projects – did significant damage to communities of color by dividing neighborhoods and burdening them with severe traffic and air quality impacts. Thoughtfully balancing highway investments – between maintenance, optimization, and expansion – is essential for the region to equitably move forward.

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). Going forward in the months ahead, highway policy questions are likely to continue through Plan Bay Area 2050+ and the 2026 transportation measure expenditure plan processes, while being informed by final findings and a ten-year implementation roadmap emerging from the Next-Generation Freeways Study.

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 would be priced, including express lanes and State Route 37.

Despite that, the details matter when it comes to the path forward toward pricing. Expanding a facility to construct a new priced lane has strengths and weaknesses relative to converting an existing lane – providing more capacity for person-throughput but posing a greater risk of increasing vehicle miles traveled. Similarly, moving toward all-lane tolling may yield much more substantial progress toward climate goals while generating monies to reinvest in transit – but it could create greater affordability and equity challenges without thoughtful mitigations.

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

Additionally, several key analyses are slated to be released later this year that will add further context, 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 as it seeks an equitable and politically-acceptable path forward for expanded pricing, such as all-lane tolling.

Next Steps:

Staff will share a similar presentation with the MTC Planning Committee as part of its joint meeting with the ABAG Administrative Committee on April 12, 2024, to inform upcoming discussions on Plan Bay Area 2050+ and other related initiatives. Staff will return to the Policy Advisory Council 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.

Issues:

None identified.

Recommendation:

Information.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: PowerPoint