

Egon Terplan: Bay area needs a single regional agency for planning and funding

By Egon Terplan Special to the Mercury News
Updated: 10/26/2015 02:04:43 PM PDT

MercuryNews.com

The Bay Area needs a system of regional governance that can rise to the challenges of the 21st century, one that can inspire local governments to work together for the benefit of everyone.

Many of our region's difficulties result from our system of fragmented governance. But this week, there is an opportunity to help shift that system in another direction.

On Wednesday, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) in Oakland will vote on whether to establish a single regional planning department for the Bay Area through combining the planning staff at the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) with the planning staff at MTC.

Most have never heard of MTC (a regional agency that funds major transportation projects) or ABAG (the region's council of governments), and fewer still have any idea about this specific policy issue. But the vote to create a merged planning department is important and matters for the entire Bay Area.

Many of our biggest challenges as a region -- from traffic congestion to housing costs -- are interrelated. In places with good jobs don't build sufficient housing, or if they put the jobs far from transit, for example, more people will need to drive, which exacerbates the traffic problems most of us face. Solving this requires better integrating how we plan for land use (where we live and work) with transportation (how we get around).

The proposal to create a merged planning department within MTC not only offers a path toward better integrating land use and transportation, but also an opportunity to move above our sometimes narrow perspective about what's best for our neighborhood or community and toward what's best for everyone in the region.

SPUR is a civic group and policy organization based in San Jose, San Francisco and Oakland. We have been involved in issues of regional planning for many decades. We support the proposal for a unified planning department. We also call on MTC and ABAG to begin an open process toward fully merging the two agencies, including their governing boards.

We think the proposal before MTC is the best path toward that goal.

As a first step, MTC should vote to establish the unified planning department. While MTC is the transportation agency, a single department would be far better at working on the interrelated issues of land use patterns and transportation investments. It could deliver better support and funding to local cities and counties. It could also begin to work on more complex issues around displacement, access to shared prosperity and how to fully prepare for climate change.

Second, there should be a move toward full integration of ABAG and MTC and the creation of a single regional planning agency for the Bay Area. Such an agency would combine the best of ABAG with the best of MTC. As transportation and land use are wholly intertwined, the Bay Area should reorganize itself to best deliver integrated planning.

We call on MTC and ABAG to endorse a study commission that would explore a range of options for a single merged regional agency. In recent decades, there have been numerous attempts to merge ABAG

and MTC. None has succeeded. SPUR believes the opportunity to begin by creating a single planning department provides our best chance of moving in the direction of what's best for the Bay Area.

Egon Terplan is Regional Planning Director for SPUR. He wrote this for this newspaper.