

# Merge regional agencies to address common problems

By Egon Terplan | January 15, 2016 | Updated: January 15, 2016 8:13pm

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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Passengers arrive at the Transbay Terminal in San Francisco, Calif. after taking the bus bridge from Oakland, [September 5, 2015.](#)

Even with best  
intents, adoption  
is risky

Letters to the  
editor, Jan. 19



7. Rising poverty

in the suburbs. A fragmented transit system  a lack of certainty of how to prepare for sea-level rise. These are some of the biggest regional challenges the Bay Area faces, and not one can be effectively addressed by our 100-plus local governments, each acting in its own self-interest on behalf of its citizens.

Solving these issues requires working across existing jurisdictions and developing policies and making investments at the regional scale. But our current system of governance consists of regional agencies that are largely single purpose (air, transportation, land use, water, bay protection) and is thus not structured to deal with the increasing complexity of regional issues.

Fortunately, we are at the cusp of the biggest change in regional planning in decades. It's a change that could result in the Bay Area establishing a single regional planning agency that will be better equipped to solve some of these challenges.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments have just begun a **study** into how they might merge to create a unified regional planning agency. MTC is the Bay Area's transportation planning and funding agency. ABAG is the region's land use and housing agency as well as its Council of Governments, which represents the region's cities and counties.

Merging ABAG and MTC is the right move. Doing so would bring regional land use and transportation planning under the purview of one agency with one governing board. It would improve the quality of regional planning but also make it easier to make public investments in the cities and communities that are helping solve some of the region's greatest challenges (such as by building and preserving affordable housing and encouraging development near transit).

Would creating a more unified regional agency actually result in housing being built or more people taking transit? It could if it did more to reward jurisdictions that support both market rate and affordable housing in places near transit. For example, the region should invest additional discretionary transportation and infrastructure funds in jurisdictions that act in a way that supports regional housing goals and not invest in places that do not

approve housing.

The full and complete merger is a necessary and essential step. But it alone will not solve our regional challenges.

As the merger study gets under way, it is a moment to think about what kind of regional government is needed in the 21st century. (And it is also a critical time to think about regional government because this spring, MTC, ABAG and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District will all move into the same building in San Francisco.) The Bay Area needs to ensure that our regional government has both the flexibility and the capability to succeed in its mission and improve our future.

For example, we might want a regional government that could issue bonds across all nine counties to fund needs such as affordable housing, or one that establishes a unified fare structure for transit so that every local fare is the same and a transfer from a bus to BART is at a consistent discount. Or a regional government that has the creativity to explore bold solutions as we adapt to sea-level rise such as shoreline protection that doubles as transportation infrastructure (such as a rail line).

The key is to think big.

We are in debt to the prior generation of leaders who created institutions and regional agencies in the post-World War II years (such as BART, the air district and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission). These agencies preserved and enhanced many of the great attributes of the Bay Area.

Our region was, in fact, the national and statewide leader in setting up new forms of regional government. Those agencies served the region well, but a lot has changed since the 1960s — and our institutions must adapt to reflect the current reality. Now it is our turn to imagine and create the type of regional governance we need for the future. We can't lose sight of that.

*Egon Terplan is the regional planning director at SPUR. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at [www.sfgate.com/submissions](http://www.sfgate.com/submissions).*

## Get involved

Share your thoughts on how to create more effective regional government. Come to a public workshop or get in touch with your ABAG or MTC representatives.

**What:** A workshop on the merger study of ABAG and MTC.

**When:** 9 a.m. to noon, Jan. 22

**Where:** Metrocenter, 101 Eighth St., Oakland.

**To learn more:** go to: <http://mtc.ca.gov/whats-happening/meetings>

**To contact your representatives:** The list of MTC commissioners is at <http://sfchron.cl/1OrYHkb> and the list of ABAG Executive Board members is at <http://sfchron.cl/117P81f>.