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# Opinion: Dave Cortese led move to blend transportation, land use agencies

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It is an understatement to say that last year's resignation of Palo Alto Planning Commissioner Kate Vershov — who cited restrictive land use policies for driving up the cost of housing as reason for her departure — sparked a lot of interest and reaction.

A striking response came from Palo Alto's mayor, who stated that “Palo Alto's greatest problem right now is the Bay Area's massive job growth.”

Is job growth the region's greatest problem? Or is it our collective failure to plan for that growth?

The jobs/housing imbalance in the Bay Area is causing real harm to the environment as well as to the region's economic stability and quality of life. If we fail to act, it could tarnish our region's competitive strength.

Two agencies have the responsibility of addressing these issues in the nine county Bay Area. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) is the Bay Area's regional transportation planning and funding agency. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) is the Bay Area's council of governments, with members from more than 100 cities and counties in the region. It focuses on land use, housing, resilience, and other important regional planning issues.



Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors President Dave Cortese has regional planning moving in the right direction. (Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group) Staff file

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These agencies have worked independently for decades, failing to match up transit infrastructure with housing growth. Now, propelled by some of the worst traffic and highest housing costs in the nation, things are starting to change.

Santa Clara County Supervisor Dave Cortese has just completed his two-year term as the chair of MTC, where he spearheaded the effort to integrate the staff of the two agencies.

When he began his tenure as MTC Chair, Cortese found a dysfunctional relationship between ABAG and MTC. Staff wasn't collaborating, and transportation investments weren't linked to growth.

Cortese's focused effort, working with ABAG's President Julie Pierce and full board, led to a vote to combine the staff of the two agencies. His ability to build an environment of trust was critical to this outcome.

In 2016, MTC moved into a new building – the Bay Area Metro Center – with all the staff of ABAG and the Air District. The Bay Conservation and Development Commission will join them. Previously, the four agencies were located in three separate buildings with little interaction among the staff. Having the combined staff in one place will allow for more holistic conversations about congestion, commute patterns and air quality – and a healthy future.

Creating space for disparate disciplines to come together to share information and collaborate is the Silicon Valley way. We expect this co-locating of disciplines to produce thinking beyond silos and better serve our region.

But while staff integration was a major milestone, the real work is just beginning. These organizations must fully align our transportation plans and projects with where we locate our housing and jobs. A new co-chair at MTC, Jake Mackenzie, will now build upon Cortese's work by fully integrating the staff, bringing us Clipper Card 2.0 and working with local government partners and with state leaders to improve conditions for every resident and commuter in the Bay Area.

*Teresa Alvarado is San Jose Director of SPUR. She wrote this for The Mercury News.*



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