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# Planners try to keep pace with prosperity

By **John King** | October 20, 2015 | Updated: October 20, 2015 6:01pm

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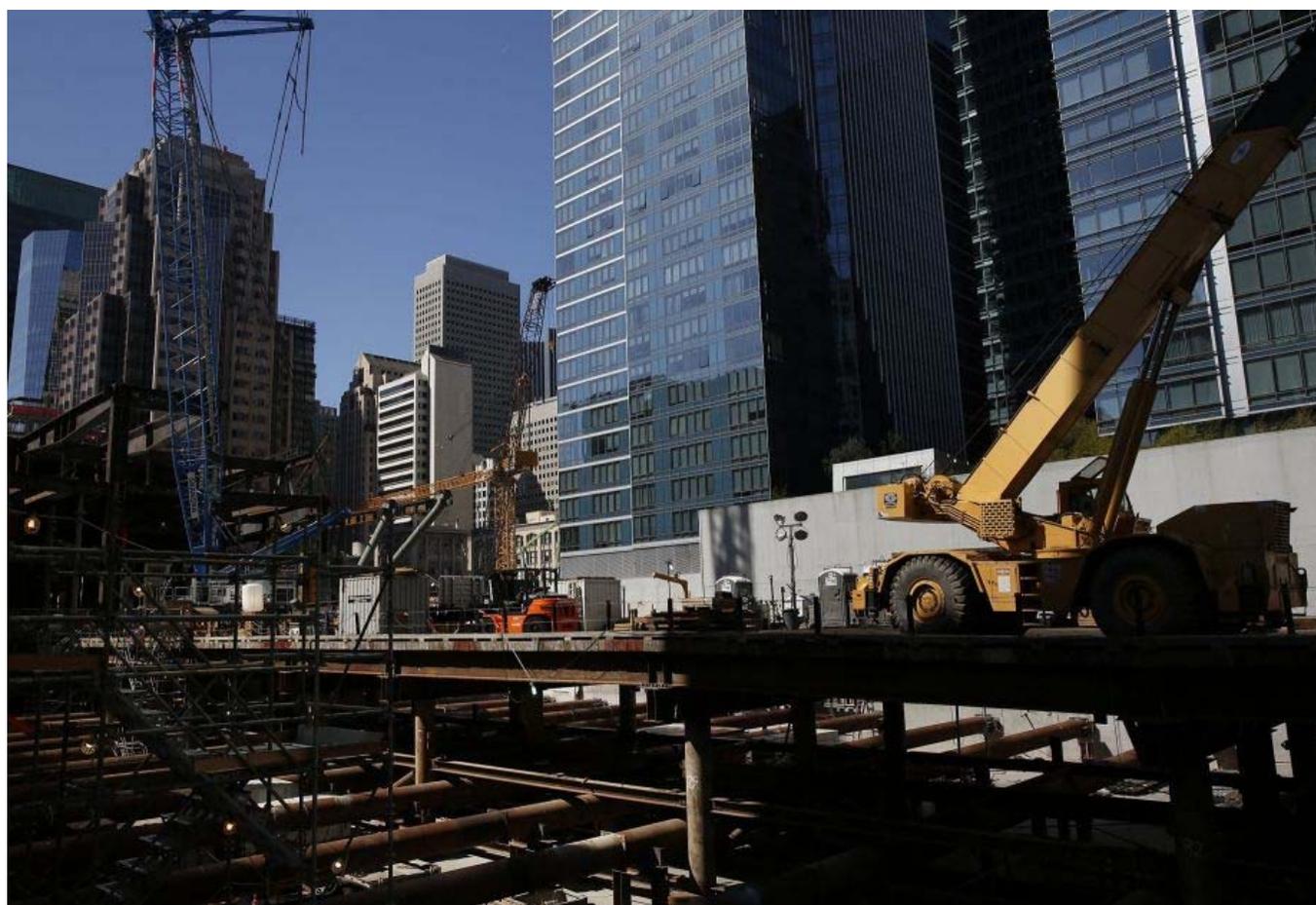


Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

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The construction site for the Transbay Transit Center Oct. 6 2015 in San Francisco, Calif.

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These are strange times in the Bay Area: Never have things been so good by such objective measurements as job creation and never have so many people been ticked off.

There's too much development, too much traffic, too much change. We want remedies ASAP, but not if there's a chance that they'll make things worse. And why is all this happening *here*?

The answer: because it's happening in prosperous metropolitan regions across the United States. Just ask planners — the bureaucrats who everyone turns to for answers, and who get second-guessed when they try to respond.

“Issues like equity and affordable housing, I don't know anyone who's not dealing with them,” said John Rahaim, San Francisco's planning director since 2008. “We all face these issues right now.”

Rahaim's comment came during an unusual panel earlier this month at San Francisco's City Hall during the annual conference of the Urban Land Institute. “The Future of Big Cities” was the topic, and Rahaim was joined by Oakland planning director Rachel Flynn and their peers from Los Angeles and Washington.

In varying degrees, each planner described the difficulties of trying to improve our urban environments while making room for abundant new housing that won't, in turn, uproot people who stuck things out when times were tough.

This is a red-hot topic in San Francisco — but it was Washington's Eric Shaw who fretted that “people who have lived in (Washington) a long time do not feel welcome” as gentrification washes through low-income neighborhoods. Michael LoGrande of Los Angeles described a housing market where “the middle-class and affluent are being pushed out by the wealthy.”

## Oakland's broad appeal

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Relative to these cities, Oakland doesn't have a housing crisis. Yet the top planning pressure in the for-now home of the Raiders, Flynn said, is that "we're becoming a place where people (of all incomes) want to be."

Theoretically, planners should be several steps ahead of the game, mapping out terrains to be filled as needed, anticipating problems before they arise. But the process seems to drag on forever. Every conceivable interest group stakes out a claim, each one eager to call a lawyer or head to the ballot if they don't get exactly what they want.

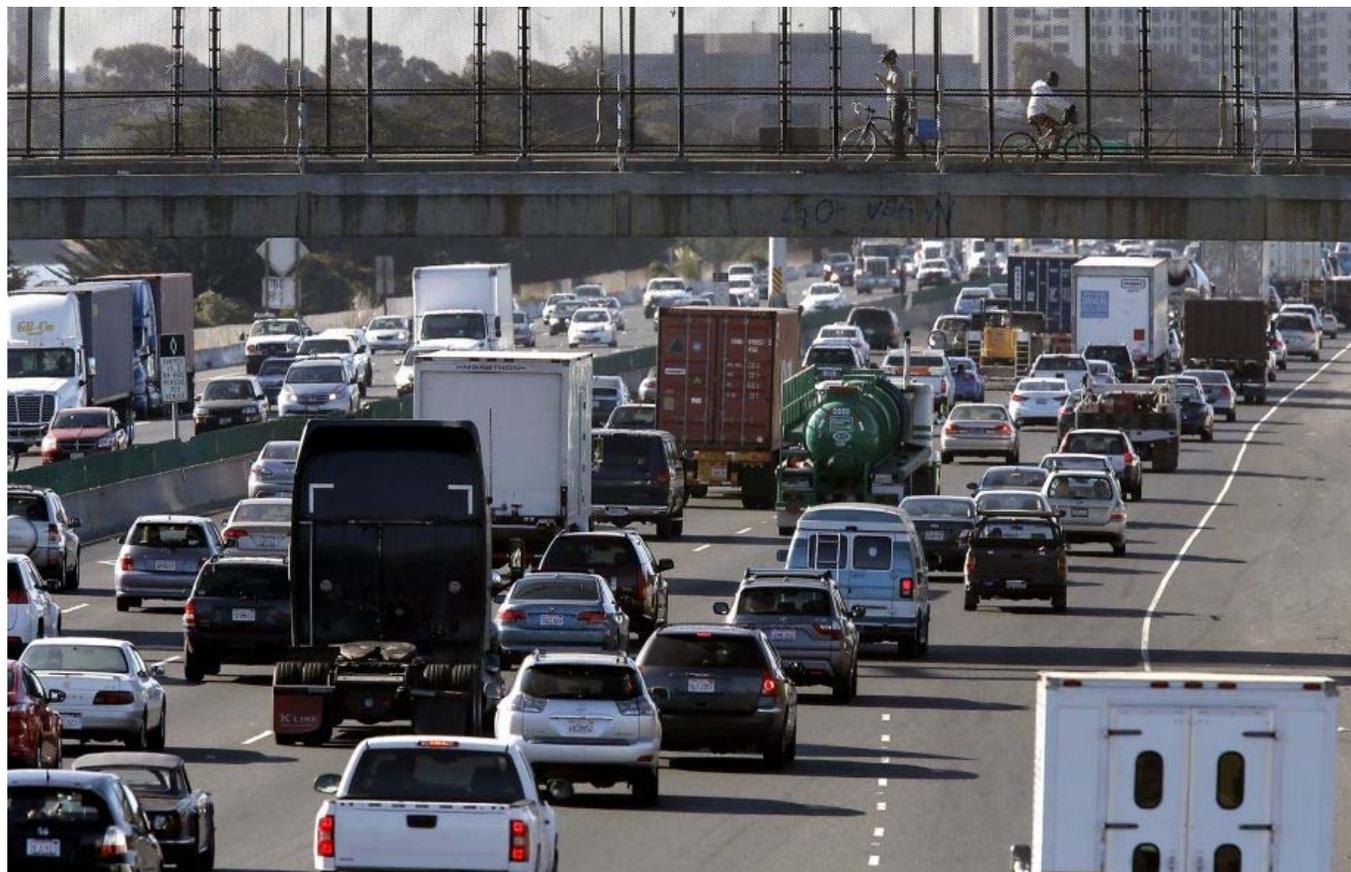


Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

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A bike riders above escape the heavy traffic below on west bound I-80 to the approach to the Bay Bridge at University, in Berkeley, Calif. on Thurs. September 3, 2015. With gas prices low, travel is expected to be up, especially by car. Folks sticking around the Bay Area could encounter chaos, when BART will shut down the Transbay Tube for three days for repairs.

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"This is the most exciting time in my career, and the most challenging," Rahaim said early on, returning to the topic later: "It's an enormous challenge, especially in this superheated economy, to keep ahead of all the changes."

The task is no easier for the Bay Area as a whole, where the nine counties and 101 cities are gathered within not one but two planning-related agencies, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments. The latter provides a range of services to local municipalities. The former controls the transportation purse-strings, dispensing money for everything from freeway widening to grants that promote development near transit. For one of those reasons that only makes sense to bureaucrats, it also provides \$4 million to ABAG each year to fund planning efforts.

In a logical world, we'd have one agency rather than two. Instead, MTC wants to cut off funding to ABAG and move the latter's planning department in-house.

All this sounds arcane, I know, but there are real-world impacts. As part of its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the state requires all metropolitan regions to prepare plans that, theoretically, rearrange development and transportation patterns in ways that encourage alternatives to car-friendly sprawl. [The Bay Area's plan](#) was approved in 2013, with an update due in 2017.



Photo: Sarah Rice, Special To The Chronicle

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**IMAGE 1 OF 2**

Director of Planning John S. Rahaim listens during a Planning Commission meeting in 2012.

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**Need to consolidate?**

The work on the 2013 plan was split between ABAG and MTC and came in months behind schedule. Now, MTC leaders argue that a centralized planning effort would speed things and make more sense.

But if we've learned one thing about urban planning in the past 50 years, it's that top-down initiatives tend to provoke resistance from the bottom up. The MTC brainstorm — we control the money so, hey, we'll call the shots — doesn't sit well with the 38 elected officials on ABAG's executive board (surprise!). Even if it did, a streamlined regional planning effort could very likely be followed by a protracted series of lawsuits.

On Oct. 28, the MTC's 18 voting commissioners will decide whether to take control of land-use planning from ABAG, leave things as they are or pursue a course in-between. If they choose the most drastic path, commissioners will defy policy watchdogs like Greenbelt Alliance and SPUR, who see the "integration" as a power grab.

Interestingly, the critics don't say the current system works. They say that what the Bay Area *really* needs is a single planning agency that doesn't supersede local authority but creates a strong framework for cities and counties to operate within. A loose regional government, if you will.

Radical as this notion sounds today, it almost came to pass in the 1970s. A similar effort fell short in the 1990s. Maybe it's time to try again, a holistic effort rather than a shotgun marriage — and maybe, just maybe, the third try will be charmed.

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