FROM FORMER ABAG EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS REVAN TRANTER, EUGENE LEONG AND HENRY GARDNER

April 29, 2016

To the Chair and Members of ABAG's Administrative Committee:

For a total of over 60 years among the three of us, we devoted significant parts of our professional lives to serving ABAG in leadership roles, including service as Executive Director between 1973 and 2011. We continue to have the utmost respect and affection for the agency to which we contributed so much. ABAG is local governance at the regional level. Recently, however, we have become deeply disturbed by what we see as potentially a grave threat to its continued existence.

As you know, in order for California to reach its greenhouse gas reduction targets, SB 375 – employing a bottom-up process – requires each metropolitan area to devise a sustainable communities strategy (SCS), through its Metropolitan Planning Agency (MPO -- a Federal transportation designation), which everywhere except the Bay Area is the regional Council of Governments (COG). Because the Bay Area, uniquely, has separate agencies, ABAG and MTC, SB 375 designates each one to carry out certain responsibilities, although no funding was allocated. That joint work has now continued for several years.

Last summer MTC voted in Resolution 4210 to discontinue funding for ABAG's land-use planning support. This dates virtually from MTC's creation in 1971; because of it MTC could depend on the land-use planning it needed to qualify for federal funding). Resolution 4210 has been described in the news media as a "hostile takeover". Such action would result in transferring most of ABAG's planning function, along with an end to its funding. The purported reason was "dysfunction" in the joint work of the two agencies.

After strong objections from local governments, labor unions (ABAG is unionized; MTC isn't), professional bodies and non-profit organizations, that decision was reluctantly postponed by MTC in favor of a merger study by Management Partners, paid for by ABAG and MTC. This is now nearing completion, with a preliminary recommendation.

At the April 22 joint meeting of the Administrative Committee and MTC Planning Committee (tasked with supervising the study), both committees voted to recommend Option 7 of Management Partners' report to their respective governing boards. This would promptly transfer all of ABAG's staff to MTC, under the direction of the latter's Executive Director. Both boards would remain intact – but with ABAG having no staff to carry out its statutory responsibilities! Option 7 proposes that at a later date, following the staff handover, the two boards would "Decide whether to create a new regional governance model." Yet there is no guarantee that this second step would ever take place – so that if, for example, MTC was satisfied with the ABAG staff handover and leaving it at that, this would be the end of the matter. It is no wonder that the joint committees' action has left most of ABAG's staff and its many retirees feeling abandoned and betrayed. There is a great deal of uncertainty about job stability and the continuation of existing pension benefits.

From the beginning of the takeover attempt, MTC's prime argument has been that the two agencies' SB 375 work on creating Plan Bay Area was hampered and delayed by "dysfunction", principally because ABAG is supposedly "process oriented" and MTC "project oriented." The word "dysfunction" has been repeated endlessly – an allegation that to date has been successfully perpetuated. Yet SB 375 work is a completely new way of preparing regional plans. All regions were challenged to meet these new requirements, and no plans were developed without some frustration.

The report by Management Partners, however, appears to have taken this particular claim as having merit. It has then been examined through a financial (or "stability") lens rather than one of organizational effectiveness and what would be best for the cities and counties of the region as well as the public. Looking at it in this fashion, one then says: The dysfunction is between a financially stable body (MTC, with vast resources) and an unstable one (ABAG, dependent for the past 55 years on member dues, federal, state and other grants, and since MTC's founding, an annual subvention from that agency to ABAG.g funds). Solution? Simple -- fold the unstable body into the stable one.

Instead, our own recommendation is to adopt Option 4, which would create a new agency that integrates the functional responsibilities of both the MPO and the COG – but leaves the existing staff arrangements intact until this has been achieved: immediately avoiding a vast amount of grief and uncertainty. As it happens, the consultants' numerical rankings place Option 4 above Option 7. We have been pleased to see that this is also the recommendation of the five members of the Assembly Select Committee on Regional Planning for the Bay Area who last week expressed their view on this subject, and whose Chair, Tony Thurmond, attended and thoughtfully addressed the April 22 ABAG-MTC joint committees' meeting.

Because of a petition presented by Mayor Pat Eklund of Novato and signed by the requisite number of counties and cities, a special General Assembly is now proposed for May 12 to guide the decision of the Executive Board at its meeting the following week.

In the meantime it is our strong hope that at today's Committee meeting you will reflect on last week's recommendation of support for Option 7, and: (1) revise it in favor of Option 4 as by far the best choice for ABAG's member governments and its staff; (2) seek to obtain MTC's agreement, and (3) arrange with MTC to rescind both their Resolution 4210 and ABAG's Resolution 1215. If those those steps taken, we can at last begin work on creating what the Bay Area lacks and needs – a first-rate comprehensive regional planning agency.

Sincerely,

Revan A. F. Tranter

Revan A. F. Tranter, ABAG Executive Director 1973-1995

Eugene Y. Leong

Eugene Y. Leong, ABAG Executive Director 1995-2004

Henry L. Gardner

Henry L. Gardner, ABAG Executive Director 2004-11

http://abag.ca.gov/abag/events/agendas/o042216a-Item%2007,%20Presentation%20Merger%20Study%20Options%20Analysis%20Recommendation.pd