Dick Spotswood: Power play over control of Bay Area's regional governance

Dick Spotswood writes a twice-weekly column on local politics for the Marin Independent Journal. (IJ photo/Robert Tong)

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The Bay Area is in the midst of an audacious bureaucratic power play that, if successful, will change the face of the region. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission is making its long-predicted move to gut the Association of Bay Area Governments, converting itself into the Bay Area's de facto regional government.

A vote is expected soon enabling MTC to assume ABAG's planning and housing allocation function. That would make ABAG's financial model untenable. ABAG, long the high-density housing bogey man, has surprisingly morphed into a bottom-up operation respecting concerns of municipalities.

That's due, in part, to two Marin council members, Novato's Pat Eklund and San Anselmo's Doug Kelly, who've taken an aggressive role reforming ABAG. It's aided by ABAG new deputy executive director Brad Paul — a Greenbrae resident — who honors the long-touted but often-ignored policy that regional agencies push their high-density, transit-first housing agendas only when local communities concur.

Ironically, with ABAG reforming itself, MTC — the ultimate top-down staff-driven agency — is now trying to take apart ABAG. If that happens, ABAG could ultimately disappear.

MTC, the mother of Plan One Bay Area, controls federal and state transit and highway money. With an annual $900 million budget, it supervises all bay toll bridges except the Golden Gate.

MTC oversaw Caltrans' construction of the controversy-plagued Bay Bridge's new eastern span.

Some say MTC yearns to be the West Coast version of the hugely powerful, but scandal-plagued port authority of New York and New Jersey. The difference is that MTC could control not only transportation but housing, until now under ABAG's jurisdiction.

MTC's unelected 21-member board is composed of county supervisors and big-city council members who frequently see their upward mobility blocked and view MTC directorships as career toppers. Given the board's size, directors must be team players to advance to board posts.

That gives MTC's staff, headed by executive director Steve Heminger, the dominant role.

Only four of the nine Bay Area counties, including Marin, don't have a designated "city representative" on MTC's board. Theoretically, the county Board of Supervisors' MTC appointee, Supervisor Steve Kinsey in Marin, represents municipalities.

The bureaucracy is well-protected with Caltrans and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development having board votes.

Heminger isn't an ideologue. He sees his role as unifying key regional agencies, with MTC at the head.

The ABAG takeover isn't about ideology. It's about power.

The telltale sign that the annexation try commenced was MTC's vote to move from its Oakland headquarters to a $360 million edifice in San Francisco. The excuse was it's more efficient to gather most regional agencies in the same building.

The shift from job-hungry Oakland to expensive San Francisco was unsuccessfully opposed by East Bay representatives and supported by Marin's director, Kinsey.

The relocation makes bureaucratic sense because it's impossible to be king of the hill when your castle isn't in the capital, that being the city.

MTC's power grab is under the radar. That's due to MTC's success in keeping it under wraps, cutbacks in Bay Area print and television media limiting coverage, and it being a regional story.

In a new cash-strapped media world, regional news drops into a black hole.

Most local elected officials, Eklund and Kelly excepted, haven't pushed back despite ABAG's absorption being against their communities' best interest.

That MTC holds sway over grants some towns covet is a powerful disincentive to complain. Oppose the all-powerful MTC and your grant is toast.

MTC's takeover of ABAG housing duties is bad for Marin. It'll be revealing if Marin's town councils and Board of Supervisors proactively seek allies to oppose the threat or instead roll over and play dead out of fear or indifference.

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