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RE: Proposed Integrated Regional Planning Department

Dear Ms. Gentry,

As you are likely aware the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), has proposed integrating ABAG's Planning Department staff into an Integrated Regional Planning Department within MTC. I believe that this change would improve the quality of regional planning conducted in our region by integrating land use, housing and transportation staff within the same agency, thereby ensuring that disagreements big and small are aired openly *and resolved*, rather than festering with no clear path forward. The challenges of the existing MTC and ABAG planning arrangement have been laid bare as a result of the Sustainable Communities Strategy process, and ultimately serve as a barrier to our ability to take on as a regional planners - in the most impactful and inclusive way - our profound regional challenges like housing affordability and displacement, congestion and jobs-housing balance, economic development and climate change. I am writing this letter to provide more insight into the basis for the proposal as well as more details on how an Integrated Regional Planning Department would function and relate to local government.

What's different this time?

Past proposals to merge MTC, the Bay Area's designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and ABAG, the region's Council of Governments (COG) have focused on the number and distribution of seats on the governing board and the related authority of a proposed consolidated agency. To date, this has been the key issue that has stalled all prior efforts at a merger as neither agency is interested in changing its existing board. In contrast, the Integrated Regional Planning Department framework under consideration is focused exclusively on integrating the planning staff and related functions of MTC and ABAG that are funded by MTC. The department would serve the policy boards of MTC and ABAG and its related Committees, including the Regional Planning Committee.

The MTC Planning Committee and ABAG Administrative Committee that currently

conduct a joint monthly meeting would continue to serve as key policy bodies, particularly in relation to the development of Plan Bay Area. This means we can continue to optimize the information and feedback loop among the region's diverse cities and counties to ensure that we are moving forward with policies, programs and investments that recognize the different needs of Bay Area communities.

How does the Bay Area's regional planning framework compare to other metropolitan regions?

In every other metro region in California, and in most metropolitan regions across the U.S., the metropolitan planning organization encompasses a board and/or staff function that integrates land-use and transportation planning within one organization. Sometimes the structure is in relation to a Council of Governments. Sometimes it is not. The complexity and comprehensiveness of regional planning varies. However, in recent years, particularly on the West Coast, the trend has been toward deeper integration particularly related to housing, transportation, economic development and conservation. Some examples of this type of arrangement include the Puget Sound Regional Council and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning – agencies that have both taken on a broad set of issues with positive results.

What is not working with the current regional planning structure? Isn't this just an internal spat amongst regional agencies that comes up every so often?

Both ABAG and MTC have bright, professional planning staff that seek to serve the region and its communities through their work. Yet, in the current arrangement, we can find ourselves working at cross-purposes, rather than in collaboration. This goes beyond differences of opinion or different ways of working - it is a result of a structure that no longer supports a productive work environment where we are able to tackle complex issues while delivering the outcomes we need to achieve together. I believe we can better organize ourselves to address the urgent issues we are facing in the 21st century, while at the same time meet the SB375 requirement that a forecasted land-use development pattern be an internally consistent part of a regional transportation plan. By consolidating planning functions, we have the opportunity to design a new structure that will enable us to be on the same team, still considering options, but working from the same playbook and focused on the same set of outcomes.

What benefits would one Integrated Regional Planning Department provide to local jurisdictions over the current structure of two regional planning departments?

The benefits of the integrated regional planning approach would include the following *at a minimum*:

- Create a “one-stop-shop” for an expanded *technical assistance* program focused on better serving local governments by providing expert planning and analytical services and support that is responsive to current needs and conditions;
Example: Building upon the existing PDA Planning and Technical Assistance grant programs, we will survey jurisdictions regarding Plan Bay Area implementation to inform the development of a new Local Technical Assistance Program.
- More seamlessly and more proactively connect *regional funding opportunities* to local land-use, housing and economic development plans and local implementation of Plan Bay Area;
Example: Establish an industrial lands access and goods movement initiative to support sub-regional planning and implementation (i.e., identify and prioritize infrastructure

needs for funding) - with an emphasis on middle-wage jobs in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, logistics and e-commerce.

- Use taxpayer dollars more productively by *accelerating internal processes and improving external communications* between regional agencies and local jurisdictions;
Example: Staff liaisons will regularly attend Planning Director, Congestion Management Agency Committee and other local and sub-regional meetings to provide consistent two-way communication and support for local jurisdictions.
- Bolster staff resources on *policy development and analysis* to foster a more comprehensive approach to developing solutions to the region's challenges, as well as a corresponding legislative advocacy agenda;
Example: Utilize city and county-level input to develop a Regional Research Agenda on high-priority policy issues affecting the Bay Area including transportation, housing, job centers, tax policy and the regional economy.
- Move the region toward the development of a *truly comprehensive Regional Plan* by integrating staff expertise on transportation, housing, economic development and sustainability.
Example: Establish a Regional Economic Development District focused on sub-regional economic strategies that provide economic, equity, and environmental benefits.

How Can MTC take on the complexities of regional/local housing policy as a transportation agency?

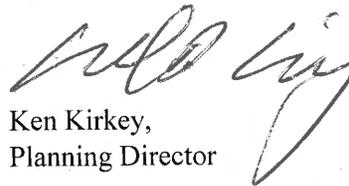
MTC has a long history of linking regional planning and effective technical assistance in support of local communities. MTC played a key role in the development of the FOCUS Program and Priority Development Area (PDA) and Priority Conservation Area (PCA) framework. MTC's PDA planning and technical assistance programs have helped dozens of local jurisdictions to plan PDA neighborhoods as complete communities. The One Bay Area Grant Program (OBAG) program recognizes the significant challenges faced by local communities by providing funding to those jurisdictions working to address the region's housing shortage. The Transit Oriented Affordable Housing Fund (TOAH), established with lead funding from MTC, is a \$100 million revolving loan fund to finance affordable housing in PDAs.

Although MTC has fostered a coherent link between transportation and land-use policy, incorporating housing and land use planners within MTC's organizational structure would indeed represent a shift for MTC as it formally takes on an expanded set of subject areas. To minimize disruption to our local partners and maintain the strong relationships developed over many years between ABAG staff and local government, MTC is committed to working closely with the ABAG staff who transfer to the new department to build on existing forums for communication, and will prioritize regular engagement with county-level planning directors, city managers and mayor/council member organizations. With a larger planning staff, the new department would include a new Local Planning & Implementation unit that will focus on providing technical assistance to our local government partners and further optimizing those relationships to advance critical outcomes.

Next Steps

As you know, the Bay Area's communities, both large and small, are facing challenges that require regional collaboration and analysis working in tandem with local problem solving. Emerging issues such as climate adaptation and displacement have joined long-standing issues such as housing affordability, congestion and advancing focused growth. The Bay Area is a region that has long served as a model to other regions and we can continue to do so through the development of a regional planning department that is accessible to local jurisdictions and provides robust regional research, policy development and expanded technical assistance. The Commission will consider the Integrated Regional Planning department proposal on October 28th. If the policy makers decide to advance the proposal, we will be reaching out to you and your staff shortly thereafter to hear from you about how such a department could best serve your jurisdiction. In the meantime, should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at kkirkey@mtc.ca.gov.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ken Kirkey', written in a cursive style.

Ken Kirkey,
Planning Director