

Plan Bay Area: The Regional Plan for Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions - The EIR is Underway

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the transportation planning agency for the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area, and the Association of Bay Area Governments have announced that they are going to prepare an Environmental Impact Report to evaluate the agencies' proposed plan to reduce regional greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light duty trucks. On June 11, the agencies issued a notice of preparation under the California Environmental Quality Act seeking comments on the scope and content of the EIR for the proposed plan, which was developed in partnership with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission. Comments on the notice of preparation are due by July 11, 2012.

The proposed plan, entitled "Plan Bay Area," calls for housing and job growth around high-quality transit corridors, especially within areas identified by local jurisdictions as Priority Development Areas. The plan strives to attain per-capita GHG emissions reductions from cars and trucks of 7 percent by the year 2020 and 15 percent by the 2035, as compared with 2005 emissions levels.

The plan implements Senate Bill 375, which seeks to integrate regional land use and transportation planning to help lower the number of vehicle miles traveled through the adoption of a Sustainable Communities Strategy. SB 375 provides streamlined procedures under CEQA for qualifying residential, mixed-use and transit-oriented projects that are consistent with an approved SCS. The proposed plan would be the Bay Area's first Sustainable Communities Strategy and would seek to take advantage of the CEQA incentives offered by SB 375, with the hope that local approvals of future qualifying development projects that implement the plan will face fewer hurdles and delays.

The notice identifies five alternatives for evaluation in the upcoming EIR:

- **Alternative 1 - No Project:** Assumes the continuation of existing land uses, planning policies and zoning requirements. It also assumes the continuation of the existing transportation network, combined with transportation projects that already have been funded (or are scheduled to receive funding) and that received environmental clearance by May 1, 2011.
- **Alternative 2 – Jobs-Housing Connection (Proposed Plan):** The agencies' proposed plan and preferred alternative. It is based on a land use pattern structured around 200 locally selected Priority Development Areas and a network of "complete communities," where each community is supported by appropriate services and amenities. Under this alternative, Priority Development Areas would absorb about 80% of the new housing and 66% of the new jobs projected for the Bay Area, on about 5% of the region's land area.
- **Alternative 3 – Lower Concentrations of PDA Growth:** Addresses land use development patterns that were not proposed by local governments through the Priority Development Areas process. It would require the consideration of various "land use policy levers" such as upzoning, incentives, fees, and growth boundaries.
- **Alternative 4 – Eliminating Inter-Regional Commuting:** Assumes that all Bay Area jobs would be filled by Bay Area workers, thereby eliminating commuting to and from neighboring regions. As a result, this alternative would require increased funding for transit services within the region.

- **Alternative 5 – Environment, Equity and Jobs:** Focuses on providing affordable housing in job-rich communities and on maximizing transit services. As with Alternative 3, this alternative would require consideration of upzoning, incentives, fees and other land use policy changes.

The EIR will be prepared as a program EIR, which means that it will evaluate the potential environmental impacts resulting from the proposed plan and the alternatives at a generalized level. The EIR will not include specific analyses of localized impacts in the vicinity of individual projects, which instead will be considered in future site-specific environmental reviews.

The CEQA process for Plan Bay Area will likely take some time to complete. But it is an important process to follow, as it could have a profound influence on future housing and job growth in the region.

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