Public Transportation: A Core Climate Solution

Written Testimony of:
Christopher Cabaldon
Mayor, City of West Sacramento, California
Transportation Vice Chair, Sacramento Area Council of Governments, Sacramento, California
916-617-4500
christopherc@cityofwestsacramento.org

Prepared for Presentation to:
U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing & Urban Affairs
Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation & Community Development
July 7, 2009 Hearing

Chairman Menendez and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how public transportation can be a critical lever for significant progress toward our nation's climate and energy objectives.

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) represents 6 counties, 22 cities and a population of 2.3 million people in the region surrounding California's Capitol. We are representative of the economic, social, and industrial diversity of the nation, with a rural agricultural sector worth nearly $2 billion annually.

In 2002, the SACOG Board of Directors adopted a Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2025 (MTP). I chaired the broad-based stakeholder roundtable which wrote that plan, and we faced the competing demands you might expect. Business interests wanted us to put our money into roads and bridges, neighborhood groups pushed instead for sidewalks and bike lanes, and environmentalists and bus riders demanded that we go all-in for public transit.

We decided to model their ideas in the extreme. What would our region look like, and what would it live like, if we spent virtually all of our money for two decades on just roads?

What about just transit? Or just sidewalks? I must tell you that we thought we were creating straw men to help shoot down the partisans at the edges. An all-roads scenarios might reduce congestion but blanket our air in poison, while the other options should have slowed congestion to total gridlock even if they improved air quality.

But here's Big Lessson #1: extreme investment strategies produced the *same* outcomes. There was virtually no significant difference in performance on congestion, travel time, vehicle miles traveled, or emissions. Why? Because transportation investments must be tightly coupled with changes in land-use in order to make any sort of difference. But when the two are married, the impact is powerful.

We ramped up investment in transit and other alternative modes in that 2002 transportation plan, but, more importantly, we learned that Big Lesson #1 and immediately got to work on the next-generation plan that would integrate the full range of policies AND investments necessary to reduce both travel time and emissions. At the same time, we wanted to arrest the ex-urban sprawl that was sapping vitality from the cores of our cities and towns while consuming prime farmland at an alarming rate.

In 2008 SACOG adopted an MTP 2035 that performed significantly better than the prior plan on virtually every indicator, including transit ridership, vehicle miles traveled, congestion, air quality and greenhouse gas emissions. Between those two plans, SACOG adopted a 50 year Blueprint growth strategy for the region that provided the needed technical analysis capabilities, political support and smart growth planning strategies to optimize system performance through integrated land use, transportation and air quality planning. I chaired SACOG for the Blueprint, and we achieved universal consensus on the boldest regional transportation and land use plan in

the nation. In doing so, we learned Big Lesson #2: four key policy outcomes—greenhouse gas reductions, urban revitalization, farmland preservation, and transportation mobility—can be achieved only in concert with one another. That's why the plan was heralded and embraced by business, housing, transit, environmental, and social justice advocates, and won awards from U.S. EPA and two California governors. That's why it is now the official model for the State of California and for regions of every type and scale. And public transportation is the plan's critical linchpin.

Through this process SACOG has learned a great deal about the very close connections between increased transit ridership and: land use patterns, air quality and overall transportation system performance. The table below provides the short story of the improvements we will realize by 2035 through the MTP we adopted in 2008 compared to the MTP we adopted in 2002. The MTP we adopted in 2008 significantly increased investments in transit and focuses much more growth into transit corridors. As a result transit service hours and boardings will grow dramatically. Transit trips grow at an average annual rate of 4%, more than double the population growth rate. The growth rate for commute transit trips is even higher, nearly 8%.

Overall transit productivity (boardings/service hour) will increase substantially. This will improve the fare-box recovery rate for transit operators and widen the margin of fossil fuel energy savings realized by transit versus automobile travel. The big win: Greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled per capita decline instead of increase or stay constant, breaking a decades- long trend that regions throughout the country have experienced. With the transportation sector accounting for such a large share of greenhouse gas emissions, we cannot avert catastrophic climate change without forcing an absolute decline in vehicle miles traveled.

Increased transit ridership also provides major benefits to automobile drivers. The amount of time people have spent sitting in their cars in congested traffic has risen significantly over the past several years. Our 2008 MTP essentially breaks that trend as well, reducing the time people spend in congestion in 2035 from a 114% increase to just a 16% increase. There are many reasons for this, but targeted transit investments is one of the most important. Our state-of-the-art modeling indicates that we realize approximately a 10% reduction in congestion for every 1% of total trips that we are able to shift from cars to transit. This is because much of the increase in transit ridership we are forecasting is for commute trips, which are longer and occur during the peak, most congested, hours. When your roadways are at capacity, shifting even relatively small percentages of total trips out of cars and onto transit produces large benefits to all users of the system. It also reduces greenhouse gas emissions because stop and go, slow moving traffic creates more greenhouse gas emissions than moderate speed smoothly flowing traffic.

Percent Change from 2005 in:	2035 (2002 MTP)	2035 (2008 MTP)
Transit Service Hours	+111%	+283%
Transit Boardings	+98%	+184%
Transit Productivity	+6%	+35%
Greenhouse Gas Emissions/Capita	0%	-8%
Weekday Vehicle Miles Traveled/Capita	+1%	-6%
Congested Vehicle Miles Traveled/Capita	+114%	+16%

In California we are in the midst of implementing the nation's most comprehensive law linking regional transportation, land use, housing and climate change planning. SB375 was sponsored by California Senate Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg – Sacramento, and patterned after the SACOG Blueprint. The bill was signed by Governor Schwarzenegger last fall. The law is follow-up legislation to AB32, the California Global Solution Act, which requires us to reduce total greenhouse emissions levels by 2020 to 1990 levels. SB375 requires regional planning agencies like SACOG to meet greenhouse gas emissions targets for 2020 and 2035 that will be set by the California Air Resources Board. As part of our preparations for meeting the provisions of SB375 SACOG has prepared a TOD (transit oriented development) scenario for 2020 that makes further improvements on both the smart growth land use pattern and the transit investments compared to our adopted 2008 MTP. Specifically, the scenario shifts an additional 15% of the growth in our 2008 plan from ex-urban and rural areas into transit corridors, and it expedites the construction of the 2035 transit system to 2020.

The data in the table below clearly suggest that even greater performance improvements are possible if land use patterns and funding for transit improves. In the 2020 TOD Scenario greenhouse gas emissions per capita decline more by 2020 than they do by 2035 in our current MTP. That's Big Lesson #3: substantial, quantifiable reductions in per capita greenhouse gas emissions can be achieved through a combination of land use and investments in transit. Congested vehicle miles traveled per capita is also better, only a 2% increase from current conditions.

Percent Change from 2005 in:	2020 (2008 MTP)	2020 (TOD Scenario)
Transit Service Hours	+39%	+184%
Transit Boardings	+64%	+247%
Transit Productivity	+11%	+38%
Greenhouse Gas Emissions/Capita	-4%	-9%
Weekday Vehicle Miles Traveled/Capita	-2%	-6%
Congested Vehicle Miles Traveled/Capita	+21%	+2%

Which brings me to Big Lesson #4: transit investments must occur early if they are to effectively stimulate the shift in land use patterns to build substantial amounts of transit oriented development (higher density, mixed use, walkable development near high quality transit service). Expecting developers to build these new products on the expectation that sometime in the future the funds will be forthcoming to put in the transit lines is not realistic. We have to find a way to do both at the same time. The transit and land use have a strong synergistic relationship that is lost if they are not done together.

We don't think that building transit earlier rather than later is an unreasonable expectation. There is abundant evidence that citizens support this. Last fall, in the middle of the worst economy of our generation, voters in diverse places like my city, West Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Marin County approved substantial tax measures dedicated exclusively to increased transit service. The large increases in transit ridership and improved fare-box recovery rates that we have experienced locally over the past year are national trends. A combination of demographic, economic and social trends, along with changes in our built environment, create a

unique opportunity for transit to finally be a center piece of not only our nation's transportation strategy, but also our aspirational energy and climate change strategy. We strongly encourage the federal government, through the Energy and Climate Bill, as well as the Transportation reauthorization and appropriations, to provide financial and policy support for this.

The House bill on energy and climate change, HR 2454, is a good start in this regard. Section 222 of that measure, championed by our own region's Representative Doris Matsui, builds on these big lessons from the pioneering work at the regional scale by SACOG and many of our colleagues across the nation. It aligns infrastructure and transportation planning with greenhouse gas reduction goals, and puts a heavy emphasis on public transit. And it does so by giving the frameworks—and some catalytic funding—to states, regions, and communities to get the job done.

In addition to increasing the total amount of transit investment in its 2008 MTP, SACOG also diversified the transit system. Transit is not a one-size-fits-all investment. In order to serve rural communities, a growing urban core, and older suburban areas alike, the Sacramento region is planning for a wide spectrum of services that suit particular needs. These include: light rail, to connect communities with high population and employment densities; streetcars, to connect regional job centers and also make it easy and simple to get around in pedestrian-oriented urban and town centers; regional rail and express buses, to accommodate long-distance commuters; dial-a-ride or neighborhood shuttles, for rural and suburban communities; as well as fixed-route service, bus rapid transit, paratransit, and subscription buses. In my own community, for instance, we have doubled our bus service and are now working to launch a streetcar system as

part of our greenhouse gas strategy, but federal policies have not caught up, stuck with a byzantine set of rules and regulations originally designed for massive heavy rail projects. The population is diverse and the transit system must recognize this.

The key elements of the land use pattern in our 2008 MTP include major market shifts away from large-lot single family construction to small-lot single family and attached products (rowhouses, townhomes, apartments), increased amounts of growth through redevelopment and infill opportunities, especially within walking distance of existing and planned transit, and a new style of suburban growth that emphasizes mixed use and walkable neighborhoods. A number of national studies document that market demand is now high for urban and walkable suburban neighborhoods. We certainly have witnessed this in our region, with small-lot and attached housing products growing from 20% to 70% market share in just the first 4 years of implementing our Blueprint plan. That's Big Lesson #5: citizens want to live, work, shop, and play in the kinds of places that transit and smart land-use planning can create. Expanding the choices available for consumers for a wider range of housing types and transportation options will allow them to live the lives they want and produce measurable and astounding reductions in our carbon footprint. It is our job to change our policies and investment priorities to make those choices possible, and in doing so we also protect our rural future and help avert catastrophic climate change.

The significant commitment our region has made to smarter growth and smarter transportation investments has occurred because these concepts have broad public and political support. People from across the political spectrum see this type of future for our region as

important to both our economic and environmental health. This broad political consensus did not happen by accident. For the better part of the past decade SACOG has engaged in extensive, innovative citizen and stakeholder outreach activities. We have conducted hundreds of workshops with thousands of citizens, engaging them with interactive computer technology and asking them to help make the decisions about growth patterns and transportation investments. We discovered that there is broad support for improving the range of housing choices, expanding viable transportation choices, locating jobs and housing near each other, and making maximum use of our existing developed areas instead of focusing most of our growth on lands with high agricultural and natural resource values that often are far away from employment and services.

We very much appreciate the Committee's interest in these issues and our story. I would be happy to answer any questions you have and to provide any follow-up information that would be helpful to you.