May 16, 2013

Mark Luce, President, Association of Bay Area Governments
Amy Worth, Chair, Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Plan Bay Area Public Comment
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607
Via e-mail: eircomments@mtc.ca.gov; info@OneBayArea.org

RE: Comments on Draft Plan Bay Area and EIR and Public Health

Dear ABAG President Luce, MTC Chair Worth, and MTC Boardmembers:

I write to recommend adjustments to the Plan Bay Area to increase funding for transit operations, support active transport, reduce exposure to particulate matter, expand affordable housing access across the region, and reduce displacement into the final Plan. As the Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD), we support and employ a range of strategies to protect individual and community health, including analyzing public health impacts of land use and transportation planning decisions. Based on our analysis of the proposed scenarios, the Equity, Environment and Jobs (EEJ) scenario suggests numerous adjustments that could address these areas in ways that support the health of all residents in Alameda County and across the region.

Increase Investment in Public Transit

The Public Health Department has recently released Getting on Board for Health: A Health Impact Assessment of Bus Funding and Access (see www.acphd.org/media/308930/transithia_es.pdf for the executive summary, and www.acphd.org/media/308854/transithia.pdf for the full report). The study documents the importance of affordable, convenient, reliable public transit to help ensure that all local residents can be healthy and thrive.

Our study focuses on the experiences of 477 transit-dependent riders in parts of Alameda County – but there are more than 2.2 million transit-dependent residents living in communities across the Bay area. Alameda County has the second-largest number of zero-vehicle households, compared to other counties in the region, making it a reasonable place to explore impacts on transit-dependent riders. Over three-quarters (78%) of all zero-vehicle households in the Bay area, however, are outside Alameda County. Transit-dependence is a critical issue throughout our region.

In the Bay Area, low-income residents and people of color – populations who also face disproportionate health burdens – rely heavily on buses. Buses are also a lifeline to essential destinations for seniors, youth, and people with disabilities. Our study found that among transit-dependent bus riders surveyed:

- Almost 9 in 10 (89%) student riders take the bus every time they go to school.
- Over 8 in 10 (83%) working riders take the bus every time they go to work.
• Almost 1 in 4 (24%) riders take the bus every time they see friends or family.

• Among seniors and people with disabilities, almost two-thirds (65%) take the bus every time they go to their usual place for healthcare.

Our study found that when service is cut and fares increase, transit-dependent riders’ health and quality of life is impacted. Among surveyed riders who were affected by bus service cuts in recent years:

• Over 8 in 10 (83%) say they have more difficulty getting to job, school, social activities, or health care appointments after service cuts. Riders report that service cuts have led to missed work and wages, late arrivals and absences at school, increased social isolation, and missed health care appointments – situations that can be harmful to health and wellbeing.

• Over 6 in 10 (61%) are experiencing longer bus wait times, over one-third (37%) are experiencing more crowded buses, and almost one-third (31%) are experiencing longer commutes. Longer waits, crowding, and longer commutes contribute to increased stress. In our study, riders reporting an increase in travel time after service cuts were almost twice as likely to report frequent stress and anxiety in their daily lives as riders whose travel time did not increase (28% vs. 15%). Stress has been linked to a wide range of health problems.

• A small portion (6%) began driving or getting rides in cars. This additional driving will increase vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions.

Given the challenges found in our study, it is not adequate to only maintain existing levels of bus service. To increase non-auto mode share and support the health of transit-dependent riders, bus service should be restored to previous levels before recent cuts – or even expanded, since the share of transit-dependent riders is predicted to increase over the next 25 to 30 years. Based on our analysis of the alternatives, we predict that the EEJ alternative would result in the best mobility-related public health benefits – improving access to destinations essential for good health, reducing stress and safety concerns, and helping support good health and quality of life for all.

Support Active Transportation

Walking and bicycling alone or in combination with public transit (active transport) can substitute for short car trips and provide physical activity. Like other parts of the state and region, Alameda County faces a significant obesity challenge. Nearly half of all adults in Alameda County (48.7%) are overweight or obese. Almost 2 in 10 (18%) Alameda County adults are obese, and this figure jumps to 24% among adults living in poverty.

Active transport can reduce the risks of obesity, chronic disease and premature death and also reduces air pollution from cars. The EEJ scenario is predicted to increase average daily time for walking or biking per person for transportation the most of all scenarios.

Reduce Exposure to Particulate Matter

Particulate matter (PM 2.5) is a known asthma trigger and has been linked to higher asthma prevalence. Alameda County has the third highest asthma rates in California. Across the nine-county Bay area region, almost one in seven residents (13.8%) is diagnosed with asthma at some point in their lives. The EEJ and Transit Priority Focus scenarios are predicted to achieve the highest reductions in premature deaths due to exposure to PM 2.5.

Advance Affordable Housing for All

Affordable housing is a challenge throughout the Bay area. In Alameda County, for example, many people spend 50% or more of their income on rent, and people living in high-poverty areas are more likely to spend at
least half of their income on rent (36% of people in high poverty areas vs. 19% of those living in low poverty areas). A lack of affordable housing has serious health consequences. These include: less money available for other important purchases like health insurance, healthy food, and childcare; health problems such as asthma and headaches related to substandard housing; respiratory problems and increased stress related to overcrowding; and increased risk for homelessness and associated health challenges.

It is important to ensure that residents have a range of options for where they live and work, and good public transit that can help them get to key destinations. By slightly expanding the focus for affordable housing to more areas outside of the Priority Development Areas currently defined within the plan, the EEJ Scenario will help ensure the region better meets affordable housing needs throughout the region.

Support Efforts to Reduce Displacement

Residents pushed out of gentrifying neighborhoods by rising housing costs are unable to benefit from local improvements like more stores selling healthy food, improved public transit, more walkable streets, greater local economic opportunities, and other benefits to the local environment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has noted that when neighborhoods change rapidly, pushing existing residents to the margins, existing health disparities by race and income can widen. The EEJ Scenario proposes incorporating specific requirements into the One Bay Area Grant to ensure local authorities are meeting the region’s target of zero displacement.

Given the importance of public transit, active transit, air quality, affordable housing, and displacement protections, we recommend adoption of the Equity, Environment and Jobs (EEJ) scenario in the draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) into the final Plan. We believe the EEJ provides the greatest public health and environmental benefits and protections for our most vulnerable communities.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Muntu Davis, MD, MPH
Department Director and County Health Officer