May 17, 2013

Amy Worth, Chair
Metropolitan Transportation Commission

Mark Luce, President
Association of Bay Area Governments

Association of Bay Area Governments
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607

Re: Comment on Draft Plan Bay Area

Dear Ms. Worth and Mr. Luce:

I am writing to congratulate you for your work developing a strong regional plan that meets the Bay Area's growing housing and economic development needs, while complying with the strong greenhouse gas emission limits established by the California Air Resources Board. I am also writing to suggest a few improvements that can help make this good plan a truly great one.

But first, I wanted to explain why The California Endowment has taken such a strong interest in the development of Sustainable Communities Strategies in the Bay Area and throughout California. At first glance, these documents may seem the exclusive domain of urban planners, transportation engineers and environmental scientists—experts far removed from the worlds of health care and public health.

However, decades of research have taught us this “siloed” worldview is completely wrong. Gridlocked highways aren’t only a traffic nightmare, they also contribute to childhood asthma and other respiratory disease. Lively downtowns aren’t just good housing and economic policy, they also encourage people to walk more, helping them get the activity they need to maintain good health.

As these examples illustrate, issues like zoning, transportation, economic development and sustainability are inextricably linked with health. Indeed, the connections between these fields are so close that I believe the SCS plans currently being developed across California may be the most important public health plans in a generation.

For far too long, health opportunities in low income Bay Area communities have been constrained by a legacy of poor planning decisions that have limited access to basic health protective resources, such as parks, safe streets, and connectivity to centers of
economic opportunity and employment. Public health research reveals that the average life expectancy of low income communities is profoundly impacted by the cumulative and synergistic impacts of planning inequity, particularly with regards to transportation, housing, and zoning. Any new effort to promote health equity requires both the explicit recognition of how past decisions shaped our current situation and the creation of strong mechanisms for robust and meaningful participation of low income communities in planning efforts moving forward. For this reason we wish to particularly acknowledge the efforts of the Metropolitan Planning Commission (MTC) to include and study the Environment, Equity, and Jobs (EEJ) scenario (Alternative 5), which appears to outperform other scenarios with respect to environmental and health equity measures. We encourage MTC and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) to incorporate the best elements from the EEJ Alternative to ensure the health and vitality of region.

At The California Endowment, we say “Health Happens Here”—in schools, in neighborhoods, and with prevention. This simple phrase encapsulates the finding that the places we live, work, and play have a profound impact on our health. That philosophy underpins our Building Healthy Communities initiative, which works closely with 14 California communities to help local children and youth grow up healthy, safe and ready to learn. Two of our 14 Building Healthy Communities sites, East Oakland and Richmond, are located within the jurisdictions of the MTC and ABAG.

I have reviewed the Draft Plan Bay Area and believe it is an outstanding start. It does a particularly good job concentrating development in existing downtowns and other appropriate places. This minimizes commutes and also reduces harmful emissions that can trigger asthma attacks and other respiratory ailments. And, by contributing to the development of mixed-use downtowns, it promotes walking and biking—zero-emission forms of transportation that also promote good health.

I also support the draft plan’s emphasis on finding new and creative solutions to vexing urban planning challenges. The Climate Innovation Grant program is a strong example. By seeding promising approaches, like bicycle sharing, the innovation grants are likely to surface new strategies that simultaneously improve health and reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Such strategies can be shared throughout California and across the country, solidifying the Bay Area’s reputation as a trailblazer and nationwide leader.

To build on these and other positive features of the draft plan, I encourage your focus on two areas where I believe improvements can be made. Specifically, I would encourage plan developers to:

- **Develop stronger anti-displacement policies.** As indicated previously, the Draft Plan Bay Area promises to revitalize downtown areas, which is an extremely worthwhile goal. However, downtown revitalization can sometimes lead to gentrification, higher rents and the displacement of longtime residents. I encourage ABAG to adopt and implement strong anti-displacement protections and support community stabilization measures, potentially including land banking and the preservation of affordable housing in at-risk neighborhoods.
- **Expand investment in alternatives to solo driving.** Although the direction of the Draft Plan Bay Area is undeniably positive, it still places a high emphasis on solo driving, particularly through the development of additional Express Lanes. These high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes also raise serious equity questions, because fewer of the region’s low income residents will benefit from these investments due to prohibitively high costs of use and lower vehicle ownership. I encourage ABAG to embrace transportation alternatives that look beyond driving—especially solo driving. And to the extent that additional highways and highway lanes are included, please work to ensure that all Bay Area residents enjoy equitable access to these resources.

I thank you for your consideration of these comments, and again, I offer my congratulations on an outstanding draft plan.

Sincerely,

Robert K. Ross  
President and CEO  
The California Endowment