

CHAPTER 2 - THE TRANSIT CHALLENGE

Sacramento Regional Transit Master Plan

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2 The Transit Challenge

Introduction

- 2.1 As a key starting point to the development of the TransitAction Plan, two ‘strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges’ (SWOC) assessments were undertaken - the first looking at the wider issues facing the Sacramento Region as a whole and the second focused specifically on Regional Transit as an agency. These analyses were supported by two main sources of information: interviews with the Regional Transit (RT) Board members and key staff; and an independent review of key background and contextual documents, projects and reports.

Regional Transit Board and Key Staff Interviews

- 2.2 A series of meetings and interviews were undertaken with RT Board members and key members of RT staff throughout the fall 2007. These meetings had two purposes: to both shape the overall direction of the TransitAction Plan; and to identify some of the daily challenges for RT in delivering its services to the traveling public. The broad themes/questions discussed included:

- What are the key issues and challenges facing Sacramento’s transit system in the future?
- What is the long range vision for transit in the region and is there more that can/should be done than is already planned?
- What is RT’s view on the Preferred Blueprint Scenario for 2050 and the implications this will have on transit service/service delivery in the Sacramento region?
- Are there any specific projects, services or changes that are essential to the

success, or failure, of transit in the region’s future?

- How should we address the need for additional capital and operating funding for transit in the region?
- How will the TransitAction Plan fit within this context and what role will this plan need to play in changing the direction for RT in the Sacramento region?



FIGURE 2.1 PREFERRED BLUEPRINT SCENARIO

- 2.3 The key outputs of the discussions were as follows:

- The TransitAction Plan should be ambitious and provide direction for transit in the region: The general consensus was that the TransitAction Plan should be more than a “Transit-only Transit Master Plan.” The TransitAction Plan must address wider land use issues in a growing region and must also set out the case for transit in relation to other transportation modes;

- Many of RT’s services are provided as a social service (“lifeline” services) and for RT to be successful, they need to grow their market share and attract new users (choice riders). There was a realization that trends in gas prices, congestion, air quality and other factors all required that transit needed to be developed as a real transportation choice. This would not be achieved by a “transit-only” approach and the TransitAction Plan would require a focus on partnerships with other agencies to achieve common goals;
- Successful transit services provide competitive journey speeds, direct routes to key destinations, high(er) frequencies, punctuality and reliability. Light Rail and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) were viewed as offering these attributes and streetcar solutions were also advocated as a means of attracting ridership. However, there was also a clear recognition for the need to have a strong bus, neighborhood ride and paratransit service supporting the whole, wider network;
- There is a need to raise the profile and image of transit: There was a strong view that the TransitAction Plan should also address the need to improve the quality and standard of the transit service provided including: reducing nuisance behavior on transit, improving network information, marketing, fares and ticketing, transfers between modes and operators and generally making the network more “legible.” The use of new technology was also seen as part of the TransitAction Plan;
- Smart Growth and the Blueprint will not be delivered without transit: the importance of the Preferred Blueprint Scenario was recognized in defining the land-use future for the region. A number

of examples were given of trends towards higher density “urban” lifestyles. However, the largely low-density, suburban form of the region’s existing land-use and the trends for growth in population, housing and employment were seen as major issues for the TransitAction Plan. The diversity of employment locations and new development locations and the need for transit links was also highlighted. There was a strong view that the TransitAction Plan has to draw relevant partners/agencies together to ensure that Smart Growth ambitions are realized;



LOW DENSITY SUBURBAN FORM

- We must make transit seamless, easy, relevant and convenient: a “Put the Passenger First” approach was supported. This requires the TransitAction Plan to review the routes, services, frequencies, standards and modes all undertaken within the wider context of the Blueprint and other challenges over the next 25-30 years. The governance issue was also raised, with a general view that wider transit coordination should be addressed as an alternative to fragmented local service provision. It was felt that a wider

approach to service planning and provision could generate efficiency savings (maintenance, purchases, etc.), and provide benefits for riders through coordinated information, fares/tickets etc. This wider approach to governance does not preclude the option of locally focused and branded transit services; and

- Transit funding for capital and operations is a major challenge: a consistent theme raised at all the interviews was the need to address funding both for capital investment and for transit operations. The need for service cuts in 2008 highlighted the funding issues facing transit service investment, expansion and operations. The TransitAction Plan has to provide the case for funding, explaining the need for funding increases if the desired outcomes (improved services, higher ridership, greater operating efficiencies, better integrated land use and transit, transit as a real transportation choice, Blueprint objectives) are to be realized in the short, medium and long-term.

The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges (SWOC) Assessment

- 2.4 The contextual information from the interviews along with background research provided the starting point for undertaking the SWOC assessment. In order to better frame the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges, two separate yet related SWOCs were prepared: the first was done at the macro or regional level and the second was a more detailed examination of RT.
- 2.5 The SWOC assessment was not only undertaken to provide useful context and a starting point for developing the TransitAction Plan, but also to help set the

overall vision and objectives for the Transit Master Plan.

The Macro or Regional View

- 2.6 The first SWOC (Table 2.1) highlights the wider issues that influence RT's ability to provide a high quality transit service. As the capital of California, Sacramento has a strong regional economy and also benefits from a favorable climate. These issues combine to make the area an attractive place to live and work. However, over the last 50 years growth in the area has been relatively low-density and suburban in nature. Employment and other opportunities have also tended to disperse, moving away from a conventional downtown/suburban growth pattern to a polycentric land use pattern with employment, retail and other services found in several locations across the region. Many of these issues work against the delivery of an efficient transit network.



SACRAMENTO: STATE CAPITAL

- 2.7 Looking ahead the inherent attractions of the region forecast an increase in population, employment and households, adding to existing issues relating to congestion and air quality. The Blueprint vision has been developed in response to these challenges.

TABLE 2.1 SWOC ASSESSMENT – THE BIG PICTURE

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High employment ■ (Relatively) Low gas prices ■ Sacramento’s climate & topography ■ The Blueprint Vision ■ State capital of California 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 50 years of suburban, low density development ■ Dispersed, multiple activity centers ■ High automobile dependency ■ Congestion ■ Poor air quality
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A Smart Growth future ■ A need for transportation choice ■ Transit-oriented development ■ 21st Century information technology ■ Green/renewable technology ■ A state/national/international leader 	<p>CHALLENGES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Big increases in population, employment and households ■ An aging population ■ Worsening congestion ■ Worsening air quality ■ Climate change ■ Energy prices & security

Specific Strengths

- Strong and diversified employment market (retail 27%, office 42%, industrial 16%, public/quasi-public 15%);
- Blueprint predicts a 20% job growth to 568,000 jobs (retail 25%, office 63%, industrial 8%, public/quasi-public 4%);
- Climate and topography of the region - annual average temp 74°F, 78% probability of sunshine;
- State capital - a center for leaders and decision makers as well as state, federal and local government employment; and
- One of the most ethnically diverse major cities in the US.

Specific Weaknesses

- Air quality - Sacramento ranks in the top 12 areas in the US for the number of days that air quality does not meet federal health standards and is the 6th worst in the nation for ozone pollution;

- Continued suburban development making transit provision difficult;
- Without any change, time spent driving in congestion is forecast to increase by 35%; and
- 92% of all trips are made by car (1% transit, 7% bike/walk).

Specific Opportunities

- Up to 50% of new housing to be ‘attached’ products in Sacramento County;
- Blueprint ‘friendly’ General Plans being developed;
- Large in-fill developments can provide a ‘show-case’ for transit-oriented development;
- Higher density and mixed use development is required if transit mode share is to reach Blueprint target (1.1% to 3.3% for region); and

- Transit needs to attract lifestyle users. Transportation Choice is a key component of Smart Growth.

Specific Challenges

- SACOG forecasts that Sacramento County will continue growing over the life of the TransitAction Plan. (Details by area are presented in Table 2.2 and summarized below).
 - Population - 55% increase (1.3m to 2.0m) by 2035;
 - Households - 60% increase (500,000 to 800,000) by 2035;
 - Jobs - 45% increase (680,000 to 970,000) by 2035; and
 - 65+ age - 80% increase (125,000 to 225,000) by 2035;
- Energy prices continue to rise.

TABLE 2.2 REGIONAL POPULATION FORECASTS BY AREA

Jurisdiction	2005	2035
City of Citrus Heights	83,856	94,308
City of Elk Grove	110,843	192,889
City of Folsom	57,454	101,461
City of Galt	23,842	39,429
City of Isleton	1,361	2,239
City of Rancho Cordova	50,679	162,825
City of Sacramento	427,409	642,257
Sacramento County (unincorporated)	527,790	751,135
Totals	1,283,234	1,986,543

Source: SACOG MTP2035 Appendix D

The Regional Transit View

- 2.8 The RT-related SWOC framework (Table 2.3) shows an infrastructure and organization that provides a comprehensive transit service, benefiting from investment over a sustained period and with a set of further projects to enhance the scope and quality of services. However, the analysis also highlights the difficulties posed by the wider macro-issues, resulting in a low market share for transit, and a focus on providing “lifeline services for transit-dependent passengers.” These services and the renewal and maintenance of existing assets are delivered against challenging financial targets.
- 2.9 Looking ahead, RT has many opportunities and significant challenges to address. The role of transit is central to the delivery of a sustainable and prosperous Sacramento region. The growth forecasts and the Blueprint vision will not succeed without a high quality transit network relevant to the 21st century lifestyles of its existing and future inhabitants.
- 2.10 However, for RT to be able to contribute to the delivery of a new Smart Growth Sacramento, it will need funding for capital investment to extend and improve the quality of the transit network, and for operating revenues to run a comprehensive network.

TABLE 2.3 SWOC ASSESSMENT – THE REGIONAL TRANSIT VIEW

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mature existing transit system ■ The light rail network ■ Modern bus fleet ■ RT staff ■ Overall passenger growth ■ A range of new ‘expansion’ projects ■ The Blueprint vision ■ Recent increases in farebox recovery (25%) 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Transit market share ■ Perception of a ‘lifeline’ service offer ■ Finances are tight ■ Delivery timescales for new projects
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ RT as a leader/innovator - information technology, carbon footprint ■ Changing public opinion - from ‘Lifeline’ to ‘Lifestyle’ ■ Genuine transportation choice ■ ‘New Transit’ as the key to a Smart Growth future ■ Integrated transportation solutions ■ Working with ‘tomorrow’s travelers’ ■ More people means more passengers 	<p>CHALLENGES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintenance & renewal of existing facilities & infrastructure ■ Providing a transit system for an expanding & dispersed region ■ Responding to a changing demographic - an aging population ■ How can RT ‘help save the planet’? ■ Finding the funding ■ Government and public’s willingness to pay for transit improvements

Specific Strengths

- 97 bus routes, 37 mile light rail system;
- Serving 1.4 million potential customers covering a service area of 418 square miles;
- Ridership more than doubled in last 20 years - from 14 million in 1987 to 34.4 million passengers (fiscal year to end December 2008); and
- 100% CGN in full-sized (40’) fleet

Specific Weaknesses

- Transit only carries a small share of the overall travel market (1.1%);
- Recent service reductions and fare increases.
- Reduction/elimination of state funding sources.
- Perception of RT services as ‘social service’ rather than mass transit; and
- RT is only one of 14 regional transit agencies.

Specific Opportunities

- Up to 50% of new housing to be ‘attached’ products in Sacramento County;
- 20% of RT’s passengers use transit to get to school;
- Patronage on the system is continuing to grow (4-7% per year) and existing riders rate the system positively (72%); and
- SACOG’s analysis predicts:
 - Region-wide transit trips will grow from 93,000/day to 629,000/day by 2050; and
 - Region-wide trips into the Sacramento downtown will rise by approximately 40%.

Specific Challenges

- RT’s light rail vehicles are approaching mid-life refurbishment and will need to be replaced during the ‘life’ of the TransitAction Plan - 60% of the fleet is between 17-20 years old;
- RT provides and maintains 3,600 bus stops but only 40% have benches (1,470) and less than 10% have shelters (332); and
- The number of seniors is predicted to double, increasing demand for fully accessible transit and Paratransit services, including bus shelters and other transit amenities.

Conclusions

- 2.11 The inputs from RT Board members and staff and the SWOC analyses have defined the challenges facing RT as it develops the TransitAction Plan. The long-term changes to the region with the forecast of continuing growth and the new ambitions as set out in the Blueprint point towards a TransitAction Plan that sets a new transit agenda with an integrated approach to capital investment and improved levels of transit service. It also calls for an integrated approach between transit planning, Smart Growth land use and a complementary approach to transportation demand management. This complete approach to transit planning will put Sacramento alongside many of its contemporaries, in California, the rest of the USA and beyond.