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40 Years of Ignoring Transit-First

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If you live in San Francisco and pay attention to transportation issues, there's no doubt you are aware: San Francisco is officially a "Transit-First" city. You can review the full "Transit-First" language in [Section 8A.115](#) of the City Charter, but the upshot can be found in the [third point](#) of the section:

Decisions regarding the use of limited public street and sidewalk space shall encourage the use of public rights of way by pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit, and shall strive to reduce traffic and improve public health and safety.

While this rhetoric sounds great in principle, a quick glance at our city's [mode-share numbers](#) or a visit to any street in San Francisco will reveal that our city's transportation infrastructure is still built overwhelmingly to accommodate the use of the private automobile. And since this resolution was passed by the Board of Supervisors on March 19th, 1973, today officially marks 40 years of ignoring our own Transit-First decree.

While some might point to a particular project like the city's major commitment to the Central Subway as evidence of Transit-First policies in action, the reality is that the Municipal Transportation Agency (MTA), the department that oversees the design of our public right-of-ways and runs MUNI, is simply not doing enough to keep up with the ad hoc change in transportation choices made by the San Francisco public, let alone the 40-year-old Transit-First principle. A good many of our fellow San Francisco citizens actually want to move away from the private automobile to rely on public transit, biking or walking to navigate their daily lives, but are routinely met with poor service and, worse, downright dangerous conditions. That's because the MTA isn't a Transit-First department; rather, they are Foot-Dragging-First, Community-Process-Second, Placating-Car-Owners-Third, More-Foot-Dragging-Fourth, and, if, after years of meetings and patience, community members still have the energy to prod some more to make sure the MTA lives up to their own word, maybe the city can finally get that "Transit-First" project implemented on the ground. In a world where the shadow side of the private automobile becomes more prevalent every day -- exacerbation of environmental issues, serious bodily injury or death to pedestrians on a daily basis, the sacrifice of a sense of community in exchange for speedy thoroughways and plentiful car storage; the very challenges the Board of Supervisors was attempting to address in 1973 -- the MTA has failed time and again to do the job for which we San Francisco citizens amply pay them.

I don't just want to speak in generalities and platitudes. For those of you who haven't gotten down and dirty with the specifics of how the MTA works, here is a peek into a smattering of projects that I've been involved with in one way or another that exhibit just how far away from a "Transit-First" city we are.

- The Fell and Oak Separated Bikeways -- This is a classic example of everything that is wrong with our city's Transportation Agency. Fell Street and Oak Street between Scott and Baker are critical biking sections connecting the Wiggle and the Panhandle. For years, the community of people who live around this area as well as the city's overall biking community clamored to make this section safer for bikers and pedestrians: Fell Street had a narrow 5' bike lane sandwiched between parked cars and speedy one-way traffic and Oak Street was completely bereft of any semblance of bicycle infrastructure. Shortly after taking office in 2011, Ed Lee called for the city to "move quickly" to address this seriously dangerous stretch of roadway. Of course, in San Francisco, "moving quickly" means years of community meetings, hearings, and appeals, and numerous delays as the MTA figured out a way to relocate as many private automobile parking spots as possible. Where are we today five months after the official approval of the project? The Fell Street section has been re-striped but not buffered against traffic, and there is absolutely zero progress on Oak Street. Still today, hundreds of people literally risk their lives every time they ride the three-block stretch of Oak so that a few dozen people can have a place to put their idle private automobile while they aren't using it. This is "Transit-First."

- Van Ness and Geary Bus Rapid Transit -- Here are two serious no-brainers that highlight the city's profound inability to get a project on the ground. The basic idea behind Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is to redesign the street to separate buses from private automobile traffic so that the public transportation moves more quickly and is, therefore, a more viable option. Anybody who has ridden the notoriously slow-moving 38-Geary or the 47 or 49 lines on Van Ness knows how critical these projects are. Both were supposed to be implemented by 2012, but the current launch dates for the Van Ness and Geary improvements are 2016 and 2020, respectively. While there have been a number of factors contributing to the delays, including completion of lengthy (and some would argue counter-productive) environmental impact reports and pushback from merchants and neighbors, one of the most critical factors is the inability of the MTA and the San Francisco County Transportation Authority to effectively coordinate. Once again, our public transportation priorities take a back seat to our bureaucratic mismanagement, and you'd be hard-pressed to find someone not on payroll who thinks these projects will be finished within the new, absurdly-long timeline.
- Daylighting the Wiggle -- This one falls under the category of "What the hell are we paying these people for?" In April of 2012 I sent an email to the MTA asking them to look in to "daylighting" intersections on the Wiggle -- essentially moving private automobiles away from being parked directly on top of crosswalks, seriously inhibiting critical sightlines for the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists on the heavily-trafficked Wiggle route through the Lower Haight. Putting aside for the moment that this is the exact kind of project that the MTA itself should identify and implement, the complete lack of follow-through has been mind-boggling. After not hearing a word for 10 months, I prodded the MTA again to look in to this important safety project. The word back was that, yes, this is a worthy project and they were going to soon get around to beginning the lengthy community process required to remove two to three parking spots where needed. If this city were truly living up to their own Transit-First standards, the MTA would have prioritized the daily safety of thousands of cyclists and pedestrians over two to three parking spots and laid down some red paint on the curbs adjacent to the crosswalks in April 2012.
- Separated Bikeway alongside the Panhandle -- If cyclists successfully navigate the dangerous stretch of Fell west of Scott Street, they get dumped out on to the Panhandle mixed-use path. While the meandering path through the greenery of the park can be pleasant, it's also commonly over-crowded with tourists, strollers, dog-walkers, and lots of cyclists, some of whom, it's true, are traveling at dangerous speeds. Some fellow citizens and I have been working with the MTA to prod the Recreation and Parks department (which oversees the Panhandle) to implement some basic design upgrades to improve behavior along the path (better signage alerting folks to the under-used pedestrian-only south side path, as well as crosswalk striping for the north-south path intersections and more visibility for the new Schrader Valve outlet (again, why aren't our city officials instigating this kind of problem-solving on their own?)). However, all this work would and should be rendered moot because everyone knows the best solution is to create dedicated separated bikeways alongside the Panhandle. Both Fell and Oak go from three to four travel lanes at Baker Street, a design that does nothing but contribute to higher automobile speeds along the length of the Panhandle from Baker to Stanyan. The obvious solution is to remove that superfluous travel lane, shift the parked cars one lane off the Panhandle and put down a separated bikeway where the parked cars were. You get safer car speeds and a decongested Panhandle, all without losing parking. MTA officials won't address the project on the record, but if you talk to them informally, they all admit that this improvement is a no-brainer and wouldn't take much more than the cost of paint to implement. So why are my fellow citizens and I volunteering our time to improve the Panhandle mixed-use path when the much better solution is silently waiting in the wings? No other reason but our city officials' inability to live up to their own 40-year-old Transit-First policy.

These projects are just a sample of the dysfunction unfolding every day in our municipal departments and on our city's streets. There are dozens more like them in every corner of San Francisco. And while it's easy and justifiable to focus on the impotence of the MTA and their confusion of engaging in "community-process" with actually doing their jobs and making the right decisions for the city, the truth is that the ultimate responsibility falls on our Mayor Ed Lee. Look around the rest of the country -- mayors in many other big cities are showing strong leadership in actually implementing solutions that prioritize people over cars. In Chicago, Rahm Emanuel has committed to creating 645 miles of bikeways around his city by 2020, including 100 miles of physically separated bikeways by 2015, as well as working to eliminate all pedestrian fatalities by 2022. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg not only appointed a progressive Transportation Commissioner in Janette Sadik-Khan, but he actually empowered her to make improvements happen. Seemingly overnight, New York City transformed itself from a place where riding a bicycle meant taking your life into your own hands to one with a functional grid of safe, protected bikeways. While not every New Yorker is ecstatic about the city's commitment to safe bikeways, the Mayor and his transportation czar recognize that setting up their city to thrive in the face of climate change and peak oil is essential to their future -- misguided critics be damned. By contrast, Mayor Lee loves to trumpet our "proud Transit-First tradition," our "commitment" to having 20 percent mode-share for bikes by 2020, and our status as the "greenest city" in America, but has done absolutely nothing to position our city to keep pace with the cities that take seriously the necessary transformation of our urban infrastructure. If we had a strong visionary leader in our mayor's office every single one of the above mentioned projects would be completed -- instead, we have Ed Lee.

We live in a rapidly shifting world. Nobody thinks cars are going to simply disappear from our streets, but you are fooling yourself if you think we can continue on with business as usual and still function in this city. If the impending challenges presented by climate change and peak oil aren't enough to get our city officials to get their act together, how about the simple fact that the population of San Francisco is projected to rise by 150,000 people, or 18.4 percent, by 2035. If our current ratio of .568 cars per person holds steady, that's another 85,000 cars in the city -- and you think parking is bad now.

As the 21st century rolls on, cities will be judged primarily by their ability to adapt to the demands created by a surge in urban populations and the challenges presented by the planetary crises. It used to be that this city took pride in the glory of San Francisco -- we rebuilt our city in a flash after the 1906 earthquake and constructed the engineering marvels that are the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, earning us the nickname "The City That Knows How" because we wanted to prove to everyone that we are the greatest city in the world. Nowadays, we think releasing a series of buzzword-infused press releases will do the trick. When we declared ourselves a "Transit-First" city in 1973, we still had a sense of our responsibility to pave the way for the rest of the country and basked in the accompanying prestige that came along with it. Forty years later, we've lost our edge -- we no longer lead the country in anything but distance between our stated values and our

actions and a misguided commitment to paralyzing hyper-democracy. We obviously are still the city that knows how to issue high-minded decrees, but gone are the days of knowing how to actually get anything done. San Francisco deserves better. San Francisco has always been better. Our city officials have a responsibility to uphold the honor of San Francisco -- I'll just be happy if they start to live to up to their own promises.

Follow Morgan Fitzgibbons on Twitter: www.twitter.com/wiggparty

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