**Transforming the Suburban Transit Legacy**

**Community Dialogues - a Unique Public Outreach Process for Transit Alignment Selection**

**City of Livermore**

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**Synopsis (1-4 pages)**

Intent of Program – For over 4 decades the City of Livermore had been waiting for a commuter rail extension (BART). We were there on the BART maps as a dotted line but forward progress to make that line a reality was stalled. Numerous studies had been performed, most recently in 2002 yet obtaining consensus on a preferred alternative remained elusive. For years the region was unable to justify the extension based on patronage projections, elected officials representing the City and transit agency were reading from different playbooks, and the community itself was not engaged in the decision making. Historic community support was for a freeway median alignment, but emerging smart growth principles pointed to an alignment that served the existing residential and employment centers and areas suitable for transit oriented development. Meanwhile, every year the freeway corridor grew more and more congested topping the charts in the entire Bay Area Region, and air quality in the Tri-Valley grew worse. So how was one to develop a consensus for a preferred alignment for extending BART to Livermore? The selection would need to factor in community values, garner regional support and meet the criteria for regional, state and federal funding. The project had been on the books for over four decades and a part of the work program was to recognize past actions and place them in perspective of the current regulatory and physical situation. Overcoming the past predeliction toward freeway orientation proved a large obstacle. The transit provider (BART) and the local community (Livermore) needed to develop a partnership where each took ownership of the process(es) and the funding agencies also needed to buy in. A preferred alignment would need to satisfy the community’s goals and values, but also prove to BART and the funding agencies that the regional transit needs were met and that state, regional a federal policies for funding and sustainability were achieved.

Anticipated and Actual Outcomes – Although the “original” plan for BART had been to run it along the railroad corridor and through the Tri-Valley city downtowns, the initial extension to Pleasanton and Dublin relocated the alignment to the freeway median. It was an easier sell as the typical impacts, traffic, noise and aesthetics, were much less obtrusive if the rail extension were placed in the middle of a freeway. The community clearly favored this long standing plan and it appeared that such an alignment could be most easily and constructed at a significantly lower cost. However when developing alternatives, the technical group many of whom had not previously engaged in these studies, started from scratch. Rather than concern themselves with past practice they unrolled maps and sought logical routes that met current transit planning proposals. Much to everyone’s surprise over twenty different alignments were identified, with nine alternatives warranting detailed study in the program environmental impact report. And this did not even count the community derived proposal that concatenated portions of two of the proposed alternatives.

Some alignments ran through existing quarry lands and then along the railroad corridor. Although this presented concerns within Livermore as it ran adjacent to existing neighborhoods the technical team had not anticipated any angst from the adjacent jurisdictions. So when the initial official response from the adjacent jurisdictions was decidedly against any quarry alignments due to concerns about disrupting proposed parklands and aesthetics for their senior housing development adjacent to the freeway all were caught of guard. In the end their concerns were assuaged by conducting “special review sessions” within their jurisdiction and an ultimate decision to not consider those alternatives further.

Livermore had a strong history of endorsing urban growth boundaries, protecting scenic view corridors and more recently reliance on infill development to revitalize its downtown. A recent vote to overturn the UGB had been soundly defeated. Even minor alterations to the scenic corridor brought out hundreds at council meetings. The downtown had become a raving success overnight with only a modest amount of new high density housing and a small performing arts theater and cinema complex. It seemed logical to believe that alternatives that supported those closely held community values would garner the most support. In reality the past poltergeist for freeway alignment proved a very persistent opponent. It seemed however that when it came to placing a transit corridor within the City to further promote the same development that have revitalized the downtown and could turn our national laboratories into economic eco-engines the value based judging became clouded. Even the regional transit planning organization that developed policies to support infill seemed to waiver when the costs were put into the equation. In the end the transit planning organization reaffirmed its ideals acknowledging that **all** benefits (not just costs) had to be weighed and the community, although split, developed a preponderance of informed public that reinforced their prior value system and endorsed an alignment into the downtown and focused on infill development rather than a transit corridor down the freeway and on the community’s edge.

Given that the new downtown proposal was so different from past ideas, the economy was in a very strong downturn, and the fact that the community was less than unanimous in its discussions it seemed likely that elected officials like the City Council, Planning Commission and Regional Rail Policy Working Group would take actions that mirrored the split of community between freeway and downtown alignments and placed heavy emphasis on total costs. Although many questions were raised and in depth discussions were held evaluating the environmental, social and economic benefits and impacts of each alternative in the end the elected officials unanimously supported the community derived alignment to the downtown and the labs.

Costs/Savings if any –

This process was funded by a variety of sources including the regional sales tax authority, the countywide congestion management agency, the City of Livermore, and Caltrans. The cost of the program EIR and Community Dialogues process totaled several million dollars. In order to minimize the costs of the study these agencies had staff members trained for facilitators for the community dialogues. In addition presentations to the elected officials were made by staff, reducing Consultant costs. Noticing for the Community dialogues relied heavily on electronic messaging.

Innovative Characteristics –

Dual processing of CEQA and Station Area Concepts allowed the impacts and benefits of alignment alternatives to be objectively identified by the region at the same time the community engaged in a values driven assessment of where stations should be located. The community dialogues could inform the transit agency and region without impinging on the objectivity required by CEQA. The processes were separate but co-joined and offered very different perspectives; one from regional transit planning and CEQA standpoint and one from community values and station place making. A particularly gnarly concern was that of how to inform the local community of impacts and benefits and address their concerns and how to incorporate local and regional input to the lead agency without prejudicing the CEQA process. This was accomplished by separating out the alignment issues from station area planning. Community Dialogues were held at venues with computer access to the Draft EIR, impacts that were analyzed in the Draft EIR were always referenced to that document while non-EIR issues such as community vision and values were elaborated upon and vetted at the public discussions. To assure that the local and regional advisory bodies were fully informed on the program EIR and comments to it which necessarily occurred before the Final EIR and response to comments were prepared a novel approach was required. BART prepared a Preferred Alternative Memorandum (PAM) which identified the primary benefits and impacts of the alternatives and also assessed each alternatives ability to meet regional, state and federal requirements for transit funding and sustainability. The memo did not identify a recommendation as that would be determined after the local and regional bodies vetted their issues but did summarize the results of the draft EIR, comments received on the draft EIR, and how well the various alternatives met the project goals and objectives as well as BART’s System Expansion Policy and the regional MPO’s funding policy for transit extensions which identifies a minimum threshold for housing within a walkable distance of new transit stations.

Joint Funding and Processing Partnership – With all agencies having a monetary and staffing stake in the process, Caltrans, the Countywide Congestion Management Agency, the regional Sales Tax Authority, the City of Livermore and BART having each were fully engaged in the process and all were looking for a win. Equally as important was that the people at the table had direct knowledge and insight into the local, regional and federal aspects required to develop a winning situation. A three tiered review process was developed with the technical advisories performing day to day and major work products and issues then elevated to the executive management review committee and finally the regional rail policy working group taking final elected official action.

Flexible Agendas - The processes were given a general structure but the structure was flexible and the process was re-shaped to be responsive to feedback at the executive management, technical working, elected official and general public levels. For example, the CEQA process included stakeholder check-ins before any analysis began and then again at draft level. As a result the scope for the document and potential alternatives was able to be adjusted to accurately reflect historical perspectives and included analysis that was necessary to address stakeholder beliefs and concerns. More dramatically the community dialogues were very loosely identified as a series (3) of public discussions. The first one was structured to provide information on transit planning and to review community values. Individuals were asked to rate station locations based on the how well they met the transit planning criteria. They were also asked to review and rate community values. Then they were brought into groups and they all discussed their individual analysis. Strong viewpoints existed on both sides. Transit planning consultants were asked to reiterate certain concepts and the facilitators helped make sure all viewpoints were allowed to be voiced. The outcome of these discussions were reported to the entire assembly. When unanticipated issues were raised such as crime and security issues or origins of ridership or methods for adjusting UGB’s, the second dialogue was adjusted to further inform the public about those events and the interactive activity restructured to incorporate those issues. In this manner the dialogues and alternatives development process and community dialogues morphed to fit the actual concerns of the community and region at large.

Obstacles and Results Achieved – A plethora of obstacles had kept this extension in a hiatus mode for decades but the crux of moving forward really derived from overcoming three in particular. They were political will, long memories and historic practice, and the right environment.

Past studies had been driven by “outsiders” with the community being a supporting actor or an extra. The City did not have a strong advocate at the transit agency and in fact was plagued for years with a board member who did not support this extension. Newer candidates were well meaning but had no seniority on the board nor the wherewithal to develop a consensus for this program. Recently a strong coalition formed between our Mayor, our representative on the Board of Supervisors and the newly elected BART Board member. The three acting in their various venues jointly and seperately endorsed moving forward with BART to Livermore.

Long live Livermore residents. They have memories like an elephant including one resident who is a past BART Board director. The precedence of BART running down medians of freeways and the simplicity of that idea was a whale of an obstacle. At times we were like Jonas buried so deeply within that premise that it was hard to see the horizon. A campaign was waged to keep the historical perspective. In the end, informing the public through dialogues and the EIR evaluation of impacts of environmentally superior alternatives coupled with an interactive process which the public re-evaluated their values and analyzed station pairs against those values resulted in a preferred alternative that met regulatory guidelines for sustainability and reinforced the city’s community objectives supporting the urban growth boundary and infill development.

Unintended Consequences – The process brought new voices forward in the community who previously had not been heard, some of whom provided surprising levels of support. It developed staff in new areas of expertise and connected them more profoundly with the community. It made MTC the regional transportation planning organization re-evaluate their level of endorsement of their sustainability requirements since meeting their requirements meant picking a more costly alternative.

Presentation Components

Innovation Creativity

The Dialogues Workshop process involved both educational presentations using pictures and graphics in a Slide Show (Power Point) format, and individual and group exercises to answer carefully developed questions to identify the participant’s preferences. The regional coordination and stakeholder outreach involving three levels of check in: technical staff, senior management staff, and elected officials, ensured the analysis, results and recommendations were completely vetted at both technical and policy levels. This program improved the organization and all the jurisdictions involved by providing a level of community outreach and involvement not often seen in the Tri-Valley.

Outcomes Achieved

The primary outcome is that the BART extension alternative that meet the most community, regional, state and federal goals and policies was selected despite the historical perspective. The process allowed members of the community to learn about transit extensions, their impacts and benefits, and how transit can be designed to maximize ridership and be sustainable. Community members actively involved in the process felt they were an important part of the decision making process. Many who had preconceived ideas going into the workshops were swayed to accept new ideas, not only from the staff and consultants presentation but from table discussions with their fellow residents.

Applicable Results

The BART to Livermore process can be used as a model for engaging a community regarding important, controversial decisions where community members and elected officials should consider the health and well being of the overall community despite localized impacts resulting from the decision. It can help overcome some of the political pressure created by NIMBYism.

Presentation

The presentation would likely involve a power point slide show presentations on the various components of the program, with input from the various team members, and then questions and answers by the team.