

**Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Policy Advisory Council**

October 12, 2022

Agenda Item 8

Next Generation Bay Area Freeways Study — Public Engagement Update

Subject:

Update on summer 2022 engagement activities, including key takeaways and next steps.

Background:

To reduce traffic congestion, discourage auto use, and drive down greenhouse gas emissions, Plan Bay Area 2050 includes a strategy to implement per-mile tolling on congested freeway corridors with parallel transit alternatives in a phased manner between 2030 and 2035 (Strategy T5). As a first and early action that was identified in the Plan Bay Area 2050 Implementation Plan, MTC staff launched the Next Generation Bay Area Freeways Study in February 2022 to understand if charging a fee to drive on congested freeway corridors has the potential to transform our freeways. With meaningful engagement as a core element of the study, staff presented the detailed community engagement strategy at the May 2022 Equity & Access Subcommittee meeting. Staff outlined the near-term approach to engagement with a focus on deep dialogue while uplifting voices of communities that have historically been left out of the decision-making process. This memo provides an initial summary of what we heard during these conversations and outlines next steps for public engagement.

Summer 2022 Engagement Activities:

During August and early September 2022, staff conducted 15 focus groups with support from InterEthnica, a multicultural market research and engagement consultant. Of the 15 focus groups, 11 were conducted in English; four were conducted in languages other than English, including one each in Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish and Vietnamese; one group was conducted in person (Vietnamese-speaking community); and two were conducted as in-person, one-on-one interviews (day laborers and unhoused community members). The majority of focus groups were conducted over Zoom, consistent with the preferences of participants.

As a reminder, the goals of the initial engagement were to: 1) understand the public's vision of a next generation freeway network; 2) gain a more nuanced understanding of the perceptions and concerns with road pricing; and 3) begin to identify complementary strategies that can make pricing more equitable. Staff was intentional about listening and learning early in the study with deep open-ended conversations. These conversations were not meant to make a case for pricing freeways, nor were they nuanced discussions of pricing policy tradeoffs.

What We Heard:

In all, we heard from 115 community members that reflect the Bay Area's socially-, economically- and culturally-rich and diverse population. Key themes heard that speak to each of the engagement goals are summarized below and further illustrated in **Attachment A**.

Next Gen Freeways Vision

Across all groups, participants wanted free-flowing freeways. Most participants expressed a desire for less congestion and less traffic, which could result in less stress, increased mental wellness and the ability to spend more time with loved ones and friends. Additionally, participants expressed the need for increased safety by addressing bad driver behavior — especially speeding, unsafe merging and road rage. Better maintenance and more lanes and wider freeways also rose to the top as key themes heard across all groups. For some, their vision of the perfect freeway was not having to use it at all. Across all groups, participants expressed a need to invest and provide alternatives to freeway driving in the form of better transit options. Several participants also expressed a need for better managing freight traffic on freeways.

Pricing Perceptions and Concerns

When the concept of roadway pricing was introduced to participants, most expressed anger and frustration as to what they perceived as “double taxation.” Across all groups, most participants highlighted that they already pay gas taxes, vehicle registration fees and other tolls and yet didn't see any benefits from those investments. This perception of double taxation went hand-in-hand with a deep mistrust of government in general, and policy- and decision-makers specifically, and this mistrust led several participants to indicate their disbelief in pricing as a viable strategy to reduce congestion. Many of the participants were worried that pricing would displace freeway traffic to local streets.

In addition, the majority of participants stated concern with the disproportionate impacts pricing would have on residents with lower incomes, essential workers, residents who have been priced out of the region and workers who must use the freeways. Relatedly, many participants expressed that pricing does not address the root of the problem, which they expressed as the lack of housing and viable alternatives to freeway driving. When told that equity would be a key consideration of policy makers, participants again highlighted their lack of trust in government by expressing mistrust that policymakers would keep to that commitment. Surprisingly, many participants expressed that they would support pricing if policymakers could show “proof” with hard facts and sound data that pricing will work to reduce congestion.

Complementary Strategies

Across the board, participants want to have reliable, connected, affordable and safe public transit in place before implementing pricing. Some additional examples of complementary strategies and other ideas suggested by participants include:

- Adding additional lanes or a second deck to increase roadway capacity
- Income-based discount programs without the burden of proof and enrollment
- Incentive programs for *not* using the freeway/rewards or discounts for riding transit
- Shifting the cost burden to large companies, especially technology companies
- Pilot pricing in a wealthier geography
- “Miles allowances” where drivers are given a certain number of miles for free per month
- Limiting when drivers are allowed to use the freeways as they do in some other countries

Reflections and Lessons Learned for Future Engagement

Staff feels that this engagement method of small group discussions reached a broad and diverse audience while uplifting voices of underrepresented communities. Extended conversations in small group settings enabled a robust dialogue where participants thought out loud to find their true feelings about pricing and ideas for complementary strategies. Neutral facilitation without MTC-ABAG staff in the virtual room enabled participants to think past initial reactions and grapple with ways freeway pricing could work. Participants were glad to have this opportunity to share in a small environment, hear from their peers and have a voice on the matter early.

Participants emphasized that the concept of pricing, as presented in abstract, was not sufficient to provide an informed opinion. Most participants demanded more details before they could form an opinion. Participants sought basic information about where, how much and how pricing would be implemented before forming an opinion on the viability and benefits of pricing as a strategy for managing congestion in the Bay Area. Participants want “proof” that congestion pricing has worked elsewhere and that it could work in the Bay Area, with data, before deciding if it is a strategy that they could support.

In addition, several myths and misconceptions — such as the belief that more lanes help address congestion or that freeways are already paid for — rose to the top and need to be addressed to have more productive discussions. Further, a more nuanced conversation that centers around tradeoffs needs to happen to help the public understand the consequences of the status quo. This was not an objective of the first round of engagement but will be for future engagement.

Engagement Next Steps:

Round 1B (Fall 2022): Staff will conduct webinars to begin engaging the broader public. These webinars will focus on informing the public about the challenges surrounding freeways, addressing some myths and misconceptions that were raised during the small group discussions, and refining the goals of the next generation freeway network.

Round 2 (Spring/Summer 2023): Over the fall and winter 2022-23, staff will work with the study’s staff- and executive-level advisory groups to refine the goals for next-generation freeways and co-create initial pathway proposals (i.e., packages of pricing strategies and complementary strategies). Staff plans on providing a progress update to the Council in winter 2023. Staff will then conduct technical analysis to estimate potential benefits and burdens. With these initial proposals and a high-level understanding of impacts, staff will seek to have more in-depth conversations on policy and refine pathways during Round 2 of engagement, planned for spring/summer 2023. Staff plans to engage in more small group discussions as well as (potentially in-person) sub-regional scale workshops and webinars. This phase will engage a broader audience that includes community members and local stakeholders. In addition, staff also plans to conduct a statistically valid poll in 2023 to inform the study.

Issues:

None identified.

Recommendations:

Information item.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: Presentation
- [Link to Next Generation Freeways Study: Phase 1A Engagement YouTube video](#)