Consolidation of Bay Area Transit Agencies
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Abstract
The San Francisco Bay Area transit system is anything but a single system. Twenty-seven transit operators provide service in the area. The discontinuity between agencies contributes to high cost, poor perceptions of service quality, and redundancy in the transit system. We investigated the role of consolidating certain functions of these agencies in saving transit dollars, improving the passenger experience, and providing a more coherent regional identity for the transit system. To that end, we conducted a review of literature, focusing on current issues facing transit, historical attempts at consolidation in the Bay Area, comparative examples, and identifying key elements of a consolidated system. We then interviewed transit officials from the seven major Bay Area transit agencies and MTC in an effort to understand the environment in which consolidation attempts would have to be made.

We conclude that a unified fare structure and clear Bay Area branding may improve perceptions of service quality in the entire system; that regional bus and rail service could be combined into one agency to improve service quality and reduce capital and operating expenses; and that agencies should attempt to consolidate their procurement, operations and maintenance efforts to potentially eliminate redundancy and reduce cost. However, support for many aspects of consolidation appears to be limited among area transit agencies. Respondents were concerned about loss of local control in governance and funding; some feared a potential loss of legitimacy in the public’s view. Many respondents also justified their opposition to consolidation based on current usage patterns, rather than potential usage patterns in a consolidated scenario. For example, schedule coordination was sometimes described as fruitless because few riders currently transfer between systems, despite the possibility that transfers may be depressed precisely because schedules are uncoordinated.