

## **Missing Links: Transportation Connections Needed Between Oakland and Alameda, California**

**A Report on the American Institute of Architects East Bay  
Town Hall Forum, February 24, 2010**

### **Overview**

Alameda is an island city, population 75,000, on the east side of San Francisco Bay. It is separated from the city of Oakland by a narrow channel of water, the Oakland Estuary. Plans have been made for housing and commercial development on a recently-closed Alameda Navy base. However, voters rejected these plans, mainly out of opposition to increased traffic congestion. Although Alameda has some bus service, most people travel to and from the island by car, via a few bridges or two tunnels under the estuary.

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) recognizes that sustainable transit must be a building block towards "smart growth" that enables neighborhoods to grow in population and commercial activity without more car traffic. In line with this principle, the AIA has launched a nationwide effort to identify local infrastructure solutions that can foster sustainable, livable communities. This effort was initiated by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, (D, OR). It could result in Congress providing federal funds for local sustainable transportation projects.

As the AIA East Bay was preparing to consider local sustainable transportation needs as part of this national effort, the city of Alameda, along with several other local and state government bodies, published the Estuary Crossing Study. The study, prepared by the engineering firm ARUP, considers the feasibility of a range of new pedestrian and bicycle crossings between downtown Oakland and Alameda. Right now, the only option for cyclists and pedestrians is a narrow walkway beside cars roaring through the dismal Posey Tube, a fume-filled tunnel under the estuary.

On February 24, the AIA East Bay brought together stakeholders and citizens to discuss the best potential new pedestrian-bike link between the two cities.

### **The Panel**

**John Eddy, consultant with the engineering firm ARUP, and author of the Estuary Crossing Study,** pointed out that a bridge seems an obvious solution. Walking over the narrow estuary from Alameda to Oakland would take only five minutes. However, the U.S. Coast Guard headquarters sits on a small island up the estuary from the potential bridge site. In emergencies, the Coast Guard needs to get its large boats out quickly into San Francisco Bay and the Pacific. That means the bridge would need to be 16 stories tall. This constraint led to his firm recommending a potential long-term solution of a low bridge that could be elevated to let Coast Guard boats through. As a medium-term solution, the report suggests a water taxi for pedestrians, wheelchair users, and cyclists.

**Jeff Cambra, from the advocacy group BikeAlameda,** supported the water taxi idea. Cambra showed a DVD of his own bike trip through the dark, noisy, smelly Posey

Tube—including having to lift his bicycle over the walkway railing and dangle it above the road so an oncoming cyclist could pass.

**Patricia Kernighan, Oakland City Council Member**, said that Oakland's Chinatown neighborhood wants a solution that does not increase vehicle traffic in the Posey Tube, and in its twin one block away, the Webster Tube. The exit and entrance to the two tunnels cut through Chinatown's heart. Speeding vehicles at some hours, and congested traffic at others, disrupt this otherwise highly walkable neighborhood.

**John Knox White, Program Director of the nonprofit TransForm**, said that both Oakland and Alameda need to encourage sustainable development that minimizes traffic growth by enabling people to walk, bike, or take transit to jobs and within communities. He urged that any Oakland-Alameda bike/pedestrian link also include mass transit.

### **Community Response**

**Move the Coast Guard:** Many of the 90 Oakland and Alameda residents at the forum felt the best solution was to move the Coast Guard headquarters to a more accessible location on San Francisco Bay. One possibility is the vacated Navy base on Alameda island's west end. With the Coast Guard having increased responsibility for homeland security, relocating the base could be a win-win. The Coast Guard could respond more quickly to a national security threat such as a terrorist attack. And a less expensive and lower bridge could be built across the estuary.

**Other Possible Solutions:** Other possibilities raised by residents were discussed:

- Could the Posey Tube be improved? Even a very expensive makeover could only widen the existing pedestrian/bike path through the tunnel by six inches.
- How about a new pedestrian/bike tube? A new tunnel under the estuary would be four times as expensive as a bridge, and tunnels also have security issues that highly visible bridges do not.
- Would an aerial tram over the estuary work? It could, but it would be a very expensive option, and ongoing staff costs would be high.

**Next Steps:** Suggested next steps included building public support for the interim solution of a water-taxi shuttle, and getting developers, urban designers, community representatives, and the many regulatory agencies together for regional transit planning around development expected over the next 20-30 years.

### **Conclusion**

All participants in the town hall agreed that a new bike/pedestrian/possibly transit link between Alameda and downtown Oakland could benefit communities on both sides of the estuary. The current location of the local Coast Guard base limits options for meeting this need and makes even the most feasible options more expensive than they would otherwise be. Consideration should be given to relocating the Coast Guard base.

The Estuary Crossing Study is available at:

<http://www.ci.alameda.ca.us/publicworks/pdf/EstXINGStudyFinalDraft.pdf>