



## **FlexBulletin #110: Silicon Exodus Cries Out for an Emergency "TriFlexTa"**

May 18, 2016

### **If you build it and build it and build it...they will leave**

Talk to former residents who recently visited San Francisco and Silicon Valley and they will tell stunning tales of the mother of all traffic jams. Such folks used to leave San Francisco and in 60 minutes or less zip down the Bayshore Freeway to the neighborhoods that now house Facebook and Google. These returning travelers are shocked to find that these days they have to allow 2-3 hours for the same trip.

In conversations with people who navigate this madness every day, one is reminded of the anecdote about the frog and boiling water. As the claim goes, put a frog in a pot of water which you slowly bring to a boil and the frog will not feel the danger - and end up cooked to death. But try to place it in the boil and it will leap to safety. It seems to many visitors that drivers in the Bay Area have been slowly immersed in and acclimated to miles of boiling radiators, tempers and frustration. Yet there seems to be little leaping.

### **"As Pressures Mount, New Poll Finds One Third of Bay Area Residents Planning to Leave Region"**

Then suddenly in May there appeared to be great frogs a' leapin.' The highly respected Bay Area Council, policy voice of major businesses in the nine Bay Area counties, conducts a highly respected annual poll. This year's produced a set of dramatic results. Chief among them was the widely circulated finding that "*34 percent of Bay Area residents planned to leave within the next three years.*"

The factors encouraging such an exodus were quite clear:

- *In the survey of 1,000 people presented with a number of problems facing the Bay Area:*
  - *22 percent saw high housing costs as their biggest concern*
  - *17 percent cited traffic as the most pressing problem*
  - *9 percent identified the cost of living as the greatest issue*
  
- *When choosing the top 3 issues across the full range of items, the results were:*
  - *Cost of living at 64 percent*
  - *Housing at 48 percent*
  - *Traffic at 39 percent*

It seems that the water is nearing a boil and two more findings point to a troubling future:

1. **Direction** *In 2015, 28% saw the region headed in the wrong direction; now 50% do*
2. **Traffic solutions** *Over 80%of residents think "traffic will never improve"*

The prevalent theory that frogs will endure the rising heat turns out to be more myth than science. In modern experiments, the frogs, like their human counterparts, leap from the warming pot. *But then what?*

### **Can the practices that led to the Exodus turn it around?**

*Jim Wunderman, President and CEO of the Bay Area Council, represents regional business thinking. His summary of problem and solution is revealing:*

*"We're running out of adjectives to describe how bad Bay Area traffic is and the misery it's causing. We understand residents' aggravation with traffic, but we're not giving up on the problem and we don't think that's really what residents are saying. The business community is not going to accept this fate, nor should the public transportation agencies at the state, regional and local levels that control the funding and decisions for improving our transportation system.*

*"There's no smarter, more creative or innovative region on the planet. We may not completely solve traffic, but we can put a significant dent in it," he said, "The answers are in front of us, from embracing new technologies like driverless cars, carpooling apps and intelligent transportation systems to expanding ferry service, modernizing aging transit systems like BART and Caltrain and getting smarter about how we finance and implement traffic relief projects."*

Do these slow and pricey projects reflect the strategy "If you build it they will stay?" Is it the best that the "no smarter, more creative or innovative region on the planet" can come up with.

### **Perhaps 'the most creative, innovative region on the planet' should wager on the "TriFlexTa"**

In the late 1980s and 1990s, California's phone company - Pacific Bell - promoted and practiced telecommuting under the slogan "Take the work to the workers, not the workers to work." They preferred the transportation of information over the explosion of transportation. Other regions of the country combatted congestion in that same period with the application of several forms of flexible work which combined employee satisfaction with "trip reduction" impacts.

This TriFlexTa typically combined versions of Telework, Compressed workweeks and Staggered Hours or Extreme Flextime. Firms either volunteered or were motivated by quota to reduce overall daily trips to their facilities. The power of the mixed options was that each appealed and was offered to different employee sub-groups and contributed uniquely to the trip reduction goal.

Why does such a hybrid make sense? There is great challenge and opportunity in a *region* undertaking an initiative aimed at all enterprises and individuals. The package of options can engage large percentages of drivers (70% of Bay Area employees drive to work alone.) While a teleworker represents one trip reduction each day worked at home, many will object that most positions are not suitable for telework. In contrast, a company-wide compressed schedule can clear hundreds or thousands of cars off the road over rotating days each week. Staggered hours (6-10AM start, 2-6PM quit) are an extended version of flextime that shifts traffic off-peak. Thousands of firms acting together could affect traffic.

### **Although an historic exodus is unlikely, a plea for action is definitely in order**

Greater flexibility could and should be part of the long-term solution to the Bay Area's problems. It can help reduce traffic, enable employees to live in more affordable and distant housing while avoiding punishing commutes and help reduce the overall cost-of-living. Traditional attitudes, habits and practices will have to change to make this happen. But these approaches are proven and doable. And they can happen quickly, inexpensively and in the near term. A firm or the region can telework, flex or compress much faster than Bart can be expanded or a fleet of ferries can be launched. So absent flex innovation on a broad scale, the pot will continue to boil.

Turning again to the perspective of the Bay Area Council's President:

"Residents are screaming for solutions. Do we expect to see more than 2 million residents up and leave? Of course not. But losing even a fraction of that number and the talent they represent because we failed to deal with our most pressing issues would be very bad. We need to act with urgency, we need to act decisively and we need to act regionally to address the underlying problems of housing and traffic that are causing discontent and aggravation."

Best regards, Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company  
Chevy Chase, MD  
301-873-8489

[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)

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