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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY JOHN A. VOLPE, SECRETARY OF
TRANSPORTATION, BEFORE THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA COUNCIL,
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 1969,
7:00 P. M., PACIFIC DAYLIGHT TIME

As I flew in here yesterday, I was reminded by the scene below that San Francisco is something of a paradox in the modern world. Your city has achieved a marriage of beauty and the buck.

More than one visitor has noted the contrasts, the richness of history, the variety of people working in harmony. But I think it is evident that the progress this city is making is not just an accident of geography and history: It is a consequence of leadership, the one essential resource.

Real leadership knows when to preserve a tradition and when to break one. It acts upon an idea when its time has come, and has the courage to lay its money on the same table with its stated convictions.

By these tests, the Bay Area enjoys outstanding leadership, and one of its outstanding consequences is your courage and farsighted action in supporting a regional transit system when everybody said mass transit was dead. This was supposed to be the age of autocracy, meaning rule by cars.

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But the Bay Area Council was one of the first civic groups to realize that this is not really the machine age, but instead the modern age of enlightened man. Because of your perseverance, the Bay Area Rapid Transit System is now assured of becoming a reality. The Federal Government is involved in BART to the tune of more than one hundred million dollars.

Our most recent grants have been five million for prototype cars and -- soon -- another 28-million dollars on a matching basis to finance the cost of the 280 coaches you will need prior to 1980. I regard this as a down payment on an obligation President Nixon undertook when he said that one of the prime domestic tasks of this Administration would be to untangle the knot of urban transportation.

Now you may think that it is easy for the Federal Government with its great resources to cough up a little subsidy now and then, but the fact is that the demands upon those resources at home and abroad are greater still. As the strongest world power, we must make heavy investments in world defense. We did not ask to be appointed policemen for a planet but history -- in a number of instances -- has thrust that role upon us and we have to play that role with courage and skill.

In that connection I am impressed by the President's courage and prudence in deciding to deploy a limited ABM System to defend our deterrent power. The Safeguard System will not only protect against deliberate or accidental nuclear war, but will also give us decided leverage in disarmament talks with the Soviets. The ABM decision, I think will come to be seen as a classic example of the deliberate, cautious, but tough-minded attitude of this Administration.

In the short span of 99 days President Nixon has turned the Federal Government around and won the confidence of the great majority of our people.

He is fighting inflation with a 4-billion dollar cut in Federal spending. He has launched an anti-crime program in Washington, D. C., which could become a model for the Nation; he has taken steps to smash the organized criminal combines. He has revitalized and reshaped the Executive Office of the President. He has revamped major programs in manpower, minority business and child development, and is taking the Post Office -- at long last -- out of politics. He is proposing the first in a series of far-reaching reforms in our obsolete tax laws.

He is exercising preventive diplomacy in the Middle East to avert a major blowup in that perennial tinder box of nations. He is opening new channels of communication with the Soviets. Here, in short, is a man on the move, but without the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal of perpetual public relations. Here is patience, restraint and responsibility fitting in a leader of the free world. My friends -- California has done the Nation a great service in providing us with a President of this caliber.

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His actions during the first quarter of this first year are solid evidence that we are greatly in debt to this great Golden State. From her strategic position on the rim of the Pacific, drawing upon her strengths as a commercial and cultural center, San Francisco has traditionally responded to national and international challenges. Today, this city has a historic opportunity to demonstrate a major breakthrough in one of the most critical areas of American life -- a breakthrough in regional rapid transit that could lead the way to preservation of a decent urban life in this country.

Overall, city dwellers have advanced their standard of living in the last generation, but they are not free to enjoy its full benefits because of the limits on their mobility. The problems of commutation have increased to the point where the Wall Street Journal has detected a phenomenon it calls "metrophobia." Executives and professionals are not merely fleeing the cities but are refusing assignment there even if it means a promotion with a higher salary.

Our exaggerated, almost fanatic emphasis upon the private automobile must share a large part of the responsibility for this condition. Unless we stop trying to funnel more and more cars into less and less space, the cities are going to choke-up, die, and dissolve. They will just spread across the countryside, resulting in a sort of "diluted urban sprawl" from coast to coast.

I think we are on the verge of a major change in attitudes about the automobile. But we are held back by our mental picture of the alternatives -- fuming buses and creaking subway cars. San Francisco is the obvious exception to the fact that most people don't appreciate the potential of modern transit technology. While BART is the ultimate in contemporary technology -- the Department of Transportation is looking even further into the future. It's not generally recognized that within a very few years the tracked air cushion vehicle, tube flight and the gravitrain can and probably will be realities.

Certainly, the greatest crime against mass transit is to build without an eye on tomorrow's needs. Transit lines aren't abstractions; they can't be put in place without effecting the future of all the communities they hold together and link together. It is inconceivable that new public transportation should be created without a sense of its impact on urban design, land planning, housing, parks and commerce.

This, you have done here. It is certainly obvious that the old transit lines and obsolete concepts are crippling the potential of entire regions. This nation has arrived at a point where we must stop thinking of urban transit as a second choice mode for those too old, too young, too sick or too poor to drive, and start to think of it as a basic tool for guiding the development of entire metropolitan regions. A subway isn't just a means of relieving traffic on the roads, it is an instrument for creating better urban communities. It is clear that the San Francisco Bay Area Council understands this fact.

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However, it is rare that we draw the ultimate conclusion of this premise. To put it as a question, why measure the feasibility of any system by the potential returns in the farebox?

We don't expect the Army to balance its books. No one demands that an airport make a profit, nor sewer lines and highways. A successful mass transit system confers enormous social benefits on a city regardless of whether it pays for itself in traditional terms. For one thing, it convinces the stranded ghetto dweller that the white American means it when he talks about jobs for black men, because the really worthwhile jobs are simply not located in the slums. For another, it gives an alternative to the great middle group in this country that would like to avoid the strain of driving if it had a choice -- and choice is what a viable society is all about.

Nothing I have said should be construed as an endorsement of designing transit systems to go broke. An enterprise that makes money always gets a better press than one which needs a subsidy. And in actual practice, if we create systems that really appeal to people they will earn decent profits much of the time. My view is simply that financial considerations should not be the major or only criteria of success.

I have faith that the cities can survive as coherent entities if we use our immense resources intelligently. Every mayor in this country has a filing cabinet full of potentially fruitful transportation concepts that never took root. Why not? Because they never got timely support from the movers and shakers of the community. Your experience proves that whole regions can organize and take the first steps to prevent urban civilization from degenerating into a nightmare of ugliness, pollution and conflict.

We in Washington are prepared to help those who help themselves. We believe our Center Cities Transportation Program and related programs can launch us into a new era of transportation planning. We are employing a consortium of top planning firms to provide five demonstration cities with the critical research and development facts they need to radically upgrade their transit systems.

Indeed, this is our once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve a creative breakthrough in transporting massive urban populations. I can promise you this is most emphatically not another study to be filed and forgotten.

One of these top planning firms I referred to, incidentally, is a San Francisco firm -- Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. The results will be made available to some 21 additional cities -- one of which is San Francisco -- and their reactions will be incorporated into an eventual national master plan for urban transportation.

The key concept in this operation is that almost everyone in the five initial cities -- Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Pittsburgh and Seattle -- will have a chance to have his or her say about what kind of system his city needs. Bankers, bus drivers, merchants, community leaders and the riders themselves will participate in planning.

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By the time we get this information we should be ready, Congress willing, to help the cities with revenues from the projected mass transit trust fund. The trust fund principle has worked brilliantly to promote development of highways, and it should stimulate a genuine renaissance in urban mass transportation as well.

Billions of dollars will be required to give us modern services. But we will be aided by the continuing rapid evolution of public opinion in this whole area.

The people are plainly fed up with uncontrolled sprawl, desolation, ugliness, pollution and decay. People want to be treated as individuals, not as part of a vast, inhuman urban machine. Rich or poor, they cry out for a choice.

We had better heed these voices, for the time is short. We have taken too literally the Old Testament injunction to subdue the earth, and we could wreck the delicate web of life which sustains us. Clearly, then, the old ideas of exploitation must give way to a new creed of co-existence with our environment.

I have faith that this will happen -- that transportation will be seen as a means to safeguard our resources and liberate the best that is in us. Such revolutionary advances cannot be accomplished overnight, or in four years, eight or twenty. But we can make a beginning, as travelers on a common journey.

It is President Nixon's intention that this Administration will commence the task of conquering the urban frontier. We intend to push forward with high optimism and dedication. Working with farsighted leaders such as yourselves, we can transform the cities into fit places of habitation for the body and spirit of man.

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