

Location Affordability Portal Vignettes

<http://locationaffordability.info/vignettes.aspx>



Note: These fictional narratives illustrate how families and organizations can use the Location Affordability Portal to make more informed decisions about where to live, work, and invest.



Transit Expansion: Stopping In Instead of Just Passing Through (Equitable Transportation Planning)

Jack Roberts is the director of the Valley Council of Governments (VCOG), a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the main forum for regional decision-making in a region of roughly 3 million people on the west coast. The MPO receives and allocates funding; plans, engineers, and builds public transportation throughout the region; drafts regional strategic plans; and provides information on a range of topics relating to the region's quality of life. VCOG's board includes representatives from the region's 16 city and county governments.

Jack would describe his job simply as trying to improve the quality of life in the region. One way to do this is by shortening commute times and ensuring reliable transportation routes. With traffic increasing, and the roads, freeways, and bus and trolley lines all needing upgrades, this is one of the most challenging parts of Jack's job. After many meetings and much analysis, Jack is convinced the most effective way to help commuters would be to add more bus rapid transit lines or expand the region's light rail system. Now the biggest question is where.



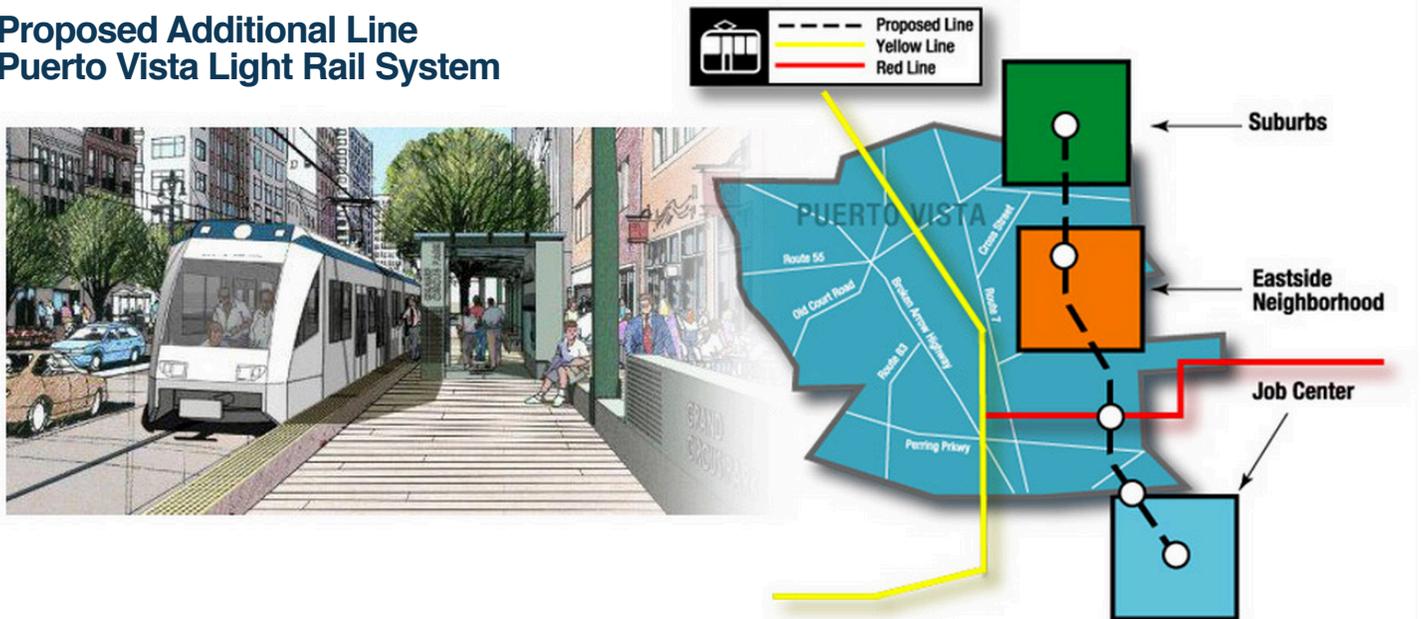
Elaine Tuppe has thought a lot about that question, and she'd like to help shape the MPO's answer. Elaine is an affordable housing advocate dedicated to preserving affordable housing and fostering strong, diverse communities in the region's central city. Recent base realignments and closures (BRAC) across the country have increased the number of military families in this region of multiple active bases, causing a severe shortage of housing, especially units with three or four bedrooms. Now, many of the new military families are competing with local moderate-income families for limited affordable housing, which drives up rents and makes housing more expensive for everyone. What frustrates Elaine most is that there is decent, affordable housing available in the area, but it's in the city's East Side neighborhoods, miles away from the main job centers and poorly served by bus and trolley lines. Living there requires long drives to work, which gets expensive: 20% or more of a working family's income can go to transportation costs alone.

VCOG announces a series of design meetings to get community input on how the region should grow and where to expand the bus lines and light rail. Elaine attends them all and leaves every one more discouraged than when she arrived. While VCOG is thinking about moving the greatest number of people as quickly and efficiently as possible, Elaine wants them to think bigger. She wants the transportation picture to include low-income families and affordable housing.

Elaine has a vision for where the light rail should be expanded so that it benefits low- and moderate-income families, but she has to convince the folks at VCOG. At the meetings she's attended, Jack seems to indicate that he's partial to the idea of the rapid light rail cutting through the eastern part of the city, mentioning

VCOG's studies that show the eastern route under consideration would get people from the northern suburbs to their jobs in the south quickly. VCOG's study uses data from HUD's Location Affordability Index (LAI) to show how high transportation costs are in the suburbs, with the implication that the addition of a light rail line in those areas could help lower those costs. While Elaine doesn't disagree, she thinks the MPO is missing an opportunity. Right now, the proposal reads more like a fast commuter line with limited stops between suburban neighborhoods and job centers. But if VCOG added more stops along the line, it would provide much needed transit access to the many low-income communities and customers to the small businesses along the route.

Proposed Additional Line Puerto Vista Light Rail System



Elaine decides to invite Jack out for a cup of coffee to discuss the VCOG studies, and as she drives Jack across town, she points out small shops and restaurants that seem to barely be in business. Jack has a lot of time to study them, since traffic is heavy and the ride is long. By the time they get to the coffee shop, he can't help pointing out that he's lost an hour of his work day. Elaine nods: "that's exactly what happens to the people living here, every day, twice a day."

Elaine takes out her tablet to help her make her case. She uses the LAI to show him the high transportation costs being paid by the population she serves. She retraces the route they just took to show him how a bus line with stops along the route – or even better, stops along the proposed extension of the light rail – will make a difference to people who need affordable housing. Intermittent stops will also help create community nodes that will boost economic activity.

Impressed with her arguments and her data backing them up, John incorporates Elaine's ideas into his proposal to VCOG's board of directors and invites her to the hearing. The proposal highlights the potential economic benefits that would accrue to the communities around the transit stops in addition to the impact on affordability of lowering neighborhood transportation costs, which are both compelling arguments to cash-strapped municipal governments.

