

THE TAIL-FIN FIFTIES

A man-made disaster in Pennsylvania steel country was an ironic stage-setter for the Bay Area Council's early '50s civic agenda. A killer-smog, enveloping the town of Donora, sickened thousands and spurred a regional environmental movement in which the Bay Area Council played a foundational role. The national uproar over Denora convinced San Francisco Mayor Elmer Robinson to inaugurate a local anti-smog campaign. Recognizing that polluted air paid little attention to political boundaries, the mayor asked the Council to convene a meeting of regional leaders. The Council responded by forming the Bay Area Air Pollution Committee, the precursor of today's powerful Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Scrutinizing air quality led inevitably to pioneering Council water and land use campaigns. In 1955, the Council issued a report warning that a decade's worth of haphazard development had already destroyed nearly 50,000 acres of productive regional farmland with worse to come. In 1957, the Council followed up with a public airing over the issue of Bay land reclamation. In this, the era of tail fins and virtually unregulated growth, filling in the Bay was generally seen as a way to increase real

estate volume in a land-starved region.

It was only one aspect of regional thinking that would be turned on its head over the next five decades.

The Bay Area Council helped raise the regional consciousness about land use by conducting a 1957 conference called "Industry and Your Community." At the event, according to the Oakland Tribune, speakers warned "California's economy will rise or fall ... on the quality of the planning utilized to settle the increasing claims for land of urban, suburban, agricultural and industrial interests."

Transportation was another issue in the 'fifties upon

which hung the regional quality of life, a factor long recognized as central to the Bay Area's prosperity. In 1951, with regional traffic arteries hardening by the day, the Bay Area Council financed a study, wrote legislation and then mustered its membership to lobby Sacramento for the creation of a Bay Area Rapid Transit Commission. Throughout the 'fifties', the Council continued to take the lead in trying to find a fair and balanced route and timetable for the regional



Studying impacts of Bay fill



Traffic is not a new problem in the Bay Area



The Bay Area Council pushed BART as a way to reduce traffic

mass transit system that rapidly became part of the regional lexicon under the personable acronym “BART.”

Rail was not the only mode of transit explored by the Council. One of the most spectacular of these experiments was a 1957 appearance by Serge Sikorsky, flying one of his father, Igor’s, new S-58B passenger helicopters. The visit, to drum up support for a network of commuter heliports included a media-pleasing day of whirly-bird hopscotching across the region. The following year, an even more significant technology presented itself at the doorstep of the Bay Area Council. In 1958, IBM took over space in San Francisco’s Ferry Building-based World Trade Center, administered since 1956 by the Bay Area Council. The Council helped promote IBM’s plan

to open a service bureau where it would offer data processing utilizing what promotional material quaintly referred to as “electronic brain units.”



The Council promoted IBM

The boldest Bay Area Council initiative of the 1950s presaged the hard slog for regional governance that would occupy the organization in the coming decades. At issue was Council-sponsored legislation to create a “Golden Gate Authority,” a single body to consolidate control and development of the Bay Area’s airports, seaports and bridges. The plan was to create an organization along the lines of the New York Port Authority. In an interview, Council Chairman, Edgar F. Kaiser explained the rationale. “The point is that each Bay Area port is today working for its own particular interest. In doing so they are breaking the progress of the whole.”

In December 1958, the San Francisco Chronicle breathlessly reported on the “dramatic move by

influential Bay Area leaders to end the economic Balkanization of the region.” In a speech before what one reporter characterized as “a Whose Who of Bay Area business, industry and labor,” Council Chairman Kaiser unveiled the Golden Gate Authority plan. In his speech, Kaiser announced, “With this plan, the Bay Area can sweep away its cobwebs and boldly move towards the prosperity and well-being of the entire State.”

Dramatic pronouncement aside, Kaiser’s call for



An idea that didn’t take off



Chairman Edgar F. Kaiser