

An Interim Evaluation of the FOCUS Program

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Executive Summary

This paper is an interim evaluation of the FOCUS program. The FOCUS program is an integrated regional strategy to approach future growth in the Bay Area led by two regional agencies, the Association of Bay Area Governments, and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, with support from Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission. A primary goal of the FOCUS strategy is to incentivize compact land development through facilitated working relationships between local and regional agencies.

To evaluate the success of the FOCUS program to date, two FOCUS goals were selected:

- (1) to incentivize compact land development
- (2) to facilitate working relationships between local and regional agencies.

One of the ways FOCUS incentivizes compact land development is by awarding grants through the Station Area and Land Use Planning Program. This program is an initiative to finance planning efforts that will result in a station area plan that increases public transit ridership. To evaluate the grant, indicators such as planned housing development, planning for new jobs, transportation choices and what has been completed in the planning process were examined. To evaluate the working relationships between local and regional agencies, city project managers and FOCUS participants were interviewed.

The evaluation found that FOCUS is incentivizing cities to plan for more housing development and future job growth around public transit stations. To determine how close FOCUS is to meeting their goal of compact housing and job development around public transit stations, the FOCUS program could establish target goals for housing and job growth. There have been development guidelines established by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the form of placetypes. For these guidelines to be used as target goals for housing and job growth, Priority Development Areas (PDA) must establish what kind of placetype fits their area.

For future evaluations FOCUS might want to consider developing clear goals and guidelines for data collection. This data collection might include progress reports from grant recipients that are then made accessible on the FOCUS website. If these progress reports are collected, they should clearly state what the guidelines are for their station area and how they intend to follow the guidelines.

The interviews of city project managers and FOCUS participants revealed that there was a history of distrust between local governments and regional agencies. The interviewed project managers and FOCUS participants said that FOCUS has developed a framework to rectify this relationship and has resulted in more support from local agencies to participate in the regional plan for development. To continue a more supportive relationship between local and regional agencies, FOCUS might consider creating a network of organizations that are able to offer resources to PDAs in lieu of monetary incentives.

The PDA framework created by FOCUS has been praised by the interviewed FOCUS participants for being a framework that allows for cities to voluntarily identify where they would like development to go. This has resulted in local buy-in and willingness to work together towards the regional plan. Although, half of the interviewed FOCUS participants said that the PDA criteria is too broad and results in a wide variety of PDAs. It seems that the FOCUS program should reexamine to prevent possible political problems in the future involving funding. For future evaluations, the city project managers could be asked about their opinion on the PDA criteria and how it has affected their planning process.

This report also recommends that the FOCUS program considers increasing their visibility. Participants noted that FOCUS and ABAG events were difficult to distinguish from one another.

The interviews revealed that there was some concern about how FOCUS incentivizes housing and job growth. The next step for FOCUS might be to consider holding a forum event to discuss how FOCUS incentivizes housing and job growth. This is a multi-faceted issue that needs to be reexamined to prevent potential conflicts between local governments and regional agencies.