

Structures Matter, but Leadership Matters More:  
The Practice of Politics in a Fragmented Region

Mara A. Marks, Ph.D.

Center for the Study of Los Angeles  
Loyola Marymount University

[mmarks@lmu.edu](mailto:mmarks@lmu.edu)

Prepared for presentation at the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation conference, "Reform, L.A. Style: The Theory and Practice of Urban Governance at Century's Turn", University of Southern California, School of Policy, Planning and Development, September 19-20, 2002.

It has been three decades since Winston Crouch and Beatrice Dinerman published their assessment that greater regional coordination would occur in southern California when local officials perceive coordination to be in their interest.<sup>1</sup> Then as now, collective action to address important regional economic, environmental, and equity challenges is frustrated by the fragmentation of authority under the region's governmental structures. Power is widely diffused – among federal, state, and a web of local governments. Dispersal of authority also extends to private groups and, in many cases, to residents capable of mobilizing against any number of collective objectives. As a USC report laments, “The region's governance structure does not appear capable of a creative and collaborative response to the changing realities of metropolitan Los Angeles.”<sup>2</sup> In the face of critical issues too big for municipalities to handle on their own but too small to warrant state intervention, the all too common response is deadlock and drift: affordable housing goes un-built, roadways become more congested, schools grow more overcrowded, critical infrastructure crumbles, and the ladder of social opportunity becomes harder to climb.

The problems associated with regional fragmentation have spawned a cottage industry of proposals for structural reform. For example, a report by the Metropolitan Area Research Corporation urges southern California communities and their elected representatives to support measures that would shift authority from the municipal level to the regional level – including pooling their sales-tax base, adopting a regional planning framework that supports smart growth, and making the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) a directly elected body with expanded authority over regional planning and transportation.<sup>3</sup> The opposite impulse is also evident. Los Angeles,

America's second-largest city, has given neighborhood councils and area planning commissions expanded authority – if only as a way to diffuse support for neighborhood secession. At the state level, the California Assembly Speaker's Commission on Regionalism recommends a number of state policies that would create incentives for greater municipal cooperation including reforming the post-Proposition 13 fiscal system, amending the California Constitution to prevent the state legislature from diverting locally levied revenues, and amending the state Constitution to encourage regional planning and finance compacts. [The problem of collective action in the context of fragmented authority is not southern California's alone, and the experience of this region has broader relevance.]

In our well-placed concern with the deficiencies affecting the formal structures of government, we should not lose sight of the informal practice of politics and the opportunities that already exist for greater regional cooperation. When it comes to governance in southern California, structures matter, but leadership matters more.<sup>4</sup>

Last year's defeat of a modernization plan for Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) is instructive. The LAX master plan, six years and \$60-to-\$100 million in the making, called for reconfiguring the airport's four existing runways and adding new access taxiways, ground traffic improvements, a new passenger terminal, expanded parking, and more efficient cargo facilities. Short of federalizing airport planning, it is difficult to imagine a structural reform that would have better positioned the master plan for adoption. Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA), the City of Los Angeles department that owns and operates LAX and three other southern California airports, enjoyed the legal jurisdiction to complete the mater plan. With approval of the mayor, city council,

and airport commission, LAWA had the authority to finance the improvements. The master plan had the support of the airline industry and therefore the support of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the federal agency that would need to sign off on the plan. Prominent local business interests with a material stake in the region's economic competitiveness approved of the plan, as did labor unions that looked forward to thousands of new construction jobs. As mayor, Richard Riordan championed the master plan, which had the support of the airport commission and – most likely – the majority of the city council. In sum, the formal structures of Los Angeles government implied all but certain approval for the LAX master plan..

Nevertheless, Mike Gordon, mayor of the tiny LAX-adjacent City of El Segundo, was able to ground the master plan. In Gordon's own account, "The City of El Segundo and all the other cities in southern California have virtually no ability to impact [LAX]. . . The City of Los Angeles controls the decision 100 percent: their master plan, their airport commission, their city council, and their mayor."<sup>5</sup> To counter the overwhelming advantage bestowed on the master plan under the existing governmental structures, Gordon used direct, personal contact and appeals to self-interest to assemble a region-wide coalition of city, county, and congressional officials capable of influencing those with direct decision-making authority over LAX.

Together with Gordon's experience, a recent survey of the region's city council members indicates that despite the fragmentation of formal authority in southern California, local officials are receptive to calls for regional cooperation. A series of focus groups and interviews with city council members from across southern California suggests local elected officials are willing to be mobilized for regional causes on the basis

of direct, personal appeals tailored to their particular interests. Through informal political practices, local leaders can overcome the region's governmental fragmentation.

## RESEARCH METHOD

---

This paper draws from individual interviews with local elected officials from across the region. These systematic interviews were supplemented with more free-wheeling discussions about airport planning in southern California with five top LAWA officials and with their rival, Mayor Gordon of El Segundo. In an effort to draw a representative sample of local elected officials, a combination of stratified sampling and random sampling was employed to select 120 mayors and city council members from among the nearly 1,000 in the six-county SCAG region.<sup>6</sup> Of the 120 officials, 66 agreed to participate in face-to-face structured interviews. These interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 \_ hours and contained a mix of open- and closed-ended questions proceeding from general questions about regionalism, to questions about regional trade infrastructure planned or underway in southern California, to questions about airport facility planning and development. Three focus groups – two in Los Angeles with local elected officials and one in Sacramento with former city council members now serving in the legislature –informed the development of the interview instrument. Draft versions of the instrument were pre-tested by local elected officials not included in the 120-person sample. In all, formal or informal discussions were held with 100 current or former local elected officials in connection with this study.

### CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS BY COUNTY

County	Random Sample	Respondents
Imperial	1	0
Los Angeles	69	30
Orange	21	15
Riverside	11	9
San Bernardino	12	7
Ventura	6	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>66</b>

---

### BUILDING A REGIONAL COALITION

---

A leading proponent of more regionally focused governance, argues that cross-jurisdictional problems demand cross-jurisdictional solutions and that cross-jurisdictional solutions demand cross-jurisdictional coalitions. Forging and sustaining these coalitions in the absence of metropolitan governance poses the central challenge of regionalism.<sup>7</sup> Mayor Gordon recognized this challenge. “The region has different interests,” he has observed, “and we felt if we could bring all those interests together in one coalition we would succeed.”

The survey of local elected officials reveals a tremendous reservoir of goodwill for coalition building in pursuit of regional objectives. For most respondents, “regionalism” is a term that conjures up images of “communities joining together for collective benefits,” “joint efforts to fix regional problems,” and “working with other

cities to provide services.” A few respondents specifically mentioned trade, transportation, or infrastructure in discussing the meaning of the term. One official equated regionalism with being “proactive” on matters such as trade and tourism, and another official pointed to “airport issues and other infrastructure to maintain the region.” A few elected officials also regard “regionalism” as a means for smaller cities to compete on equal footing with the City of Los Angeles. To one official representing a small city, “regionalism” means “competing with LA for state education funds.” It is important to note that some elected officials have distinctly unfavorable impressions of “regionalism.” For them, the concept carries negative connotations including the loss of local control and a lack of accountability. For one official from the City of Los Angeles, “regionalism” means “small cities banding together to steal LA’s” state and federal transit funding.

*IMPRESSIONS OF THE TERM REGIONALISM*

Positive	38 58%
Negative	9 14%
A little of both/ In between	13 20%

Notwithstanding the sense of competition with the City of Los Angeles, a little more than half of the respondents reported a sense of connection or shared identity among cities across southern California.

*“IS THERE A CONNECTION OR SHARED IDENTITY AMONG CITIES ACROSS SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA?”*

	32
--	----

Yes	48%
No	25 38%

Moreover, local elected officials share a sense of interwoven civic destinies. Nearly 90% of the respondents believe that the long-term economic health of their city is tied to that of surrounding communities. Nearly 85% of the respondents also believe that the quality of life of their city is tied to that of surrounding communities.

#### SHARED CIVIC DESTINIES

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The long-term economic health of my city is tied to that of surrounding cities.	32 48%	27 41%	5 8%	2 3%
The long-term quality of life in my city is tied to that of surrounding cities.	29 44%	27 41%	7 11%	3 5%

Conscious mobilization efforts are required to convert this store of favorable attitudes toward regionalism in the abstract into concrete action. The respondents have attended any number of meetings and conferences for government officials where they have come into contact with other local elected officials from across southern California. Almost all of the respondents have attended meetings of the California League of Cities and many have attended annual meetings of the Independent Cities Association, the California Contract Cities Association, or the SCAG Regional Council. Evidently, collective action does not spring automatically from informal networking and dialogue.

ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS<sup>8</sup>

Networking Event	Yes	No
California League of Cities	61 92%	4 6%
SCAG Regional Council	40 61%	25 38%
Independent Cities Association	12 18%	53 80%
California Contract Cities Association	31 47%	34 52%
A national political convention of any party	28 42%	37 56%
Other	29 44%	36 55%

The networks nurtured through this involvement seem to be a mile wide and an inch deep. When asked to name the elected officials with whom they have the most contact in the course of their governmental activities, nearly all respondents mentioned county, state, or federal officials who represent their city. Local elected officials from other cities received few mentions. Moreover, the respondents' relationships with other elected officials tend to be based on formal duties, not personal bonds. A little more than half characterized their interactions with the local, state, or federal elected officials they know best as confined to government meetings or official government business. Less than a third are on more familiar terms with other elected officials, dropping by each other's offices occasionally or meeting for lunch. Only a handful enjoys personal

relationships with other elected officials that might extend to visiting one another as guests in each other's homes.

“THINKING ABOUT THE ELECTED OFFICIAL YOU KNOW BEST WHO IS NOT ON YOUR CITY COUNCIL, WOULD YOU SAY . . .”

Degree of familiarity	Total Responses
“. . . you see him or her only at government meetings or in connection with government business?”	36 55%
“. . . you drop into each other's offices occasionally or have lunch?”	25 38%
“. . . you visit each other quite often as guests in each other's homes?”	4 6%

The rarity of informal contact creates an opportunity for a leader who is willing to invest personal effort to appeal directly to local elected officials. Recalling the time he invested to cultivate a supportive coalition, Mayor Gordon jokes, “I can do that drive on the 10 Freeway to the Inland Empire with my eyes closed.” His effort clearly paid off.

In his meetings with local officials, Gordon was probably viewed as something of an expert on airport issues. In the survey, elected officials were asked which of a variety of entities they would consider to be a credible source for accurate information about the impact of airports on their communities. On average, other elected city officials were regarded as about as credible as SCAG and the FAA. By contrast, airport officials and other interests were viewed as less credible sources of information.

WHO WOULD YOU TRUST TO PROVIDE YOU WITH ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE  
IMPACT OF AIRPORTS ON YOUR COMMUNITY?

	Credible	Not Credible	Don't Know
Other elected city officials	43 66%	15 23%	7 11%
SCAG	45 68%	13 20%	8 12%
Local business people and business groups	38 58%	23 35%	4 6%
Community groups	32 49%	26 40%	7 11%
Airport management such as LAWA	33 50%	27 41%	6 9%
FAA	46 70%	15 23%	5 8%
Pilots' union	31 47%	24 36%	11 17%
The airlines	22 33%	37 56%	7 11%

The survey also suggests that direct appeals to local elected officials can be particularly effective if regional objectives are more narrowly framed to appeal to particular local interests. When asked to describe the extent of their regional area in terms of traffic, land-use, and business patterns, nearly all respondents mentioned a geographic area or cluster of nearby cities. These mental maps seem to be approximately the scale of a council of governments. For only one respondent does “the region”

encompass the entire metropolitan area. Moreover, a city council member’s perception of an interwoven civic destiny only goes so far. When asked in an open-ended question to name their city’s primary competition for state and federal funds (e.g., tourism, manufacturing facilities, retail operations, and so forth), nearly all identified another local area within southern California. Areas outside southern California, California, or the United States were scarcely mentioned.

**PERCEPTION OF CITY’S PRIMARY COMPETITION**

	First Response	Second Response
A local area within southern California	48 73%	27 41%
A California city or region outside southern California	4 6%	9 14%
An American city, state, or region outside California	0 0%	2 3%
A city, state, or region outside the United States	1 2%	3 5%

City officials’ geographically limited perception of “the region” and their sense of inter-regional competition could undermine efforts to mobilize local officials in response to regional issues. In the case of the LAX master plan, Gordon gave careful consideration to the question, “What brings everyone into this coalition?” City councils representing communities near LAX and immediately impacted by airport traffic, noise, and safety issues were the first to join Gordon. However, Gordon understood that “NIMBY arguments, for the most part, lose.” Gordon found a more affirmative vision for the future in the concept of a “regional airport system” with air service distributed

among southern California's several airports. Details of the concept were left sketchy, particularly the question of how a deregulated airline industry would be persuaded to shift operations to outlying airports and what would happen if Orange County voters rejected a bid to convert the El Toro military base into a commercial airport.

The lack of detail, however, probably helped Gordon promote the concept of a regional system. When asked how air service ought to be distributed among the region's airports, the respondents agree on very little. A clear consensus emerged that LAX should handle a smaller share. Ninety percent believed that LAX should handle less than its current share of 75% of the region's air passengers. Half of the respondents believe LAX should handle between 45% and 55% of southern California's air passengers, with 54% the mean preference. The respondents also agree that Ontario International Airport should handle a greater share of southern California's air passengers, with over half believing that the airport should handle between 10% and 15% of the region's passengers. Located in the rapidly growing Inland Empire and accessible by freeways, Ontario International boasts a new 26 gate terminal and has local political support to serve far more than its current 6.3 million passengers annually. However, a 1977 air quality certification issued by the California Air Resource Board caps the airport's capacity at 12 million passengers annually.

If LAX handles a smaller portion of air passengers and if capacity caps at Ontario remain in effect, southern California's other airports will need to take up the slack, particularly as demand for air service increases in future years. There was no agreement among the respondents about how this should be accomplished. Discussions about whether to remove current air service caps at John Wayne Airport or convert the former El

Toro military airbase to commercial aviation have created a deep rift in Orange County. Among the officials surveyed for this study, half believed that John Wayne Airport should handle its current share of 10% or less of the region's air traffic, but half believed the airport should handle 15% to 25% of the region's air traffic. A third of the respondents believed El Toro should not handle commercial flights, a third believed the airport should handle less than 7% of the region's air passengers, and a third believed the airport should handle anywhere from 10% to 30% of the region's air passengers. Among the respondents, no agreement existed regarding Palmdale Regional Airport, often touted by opponents of LAX expansion. A third believed Palmdale should handle less than 1% of southern California's air passengers, a third believed the airport should handle between 1% and 5% of the region's air passengers, and a third believed the airport should handle 6% to 25% of the region's air passengers.

**WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE REGION'S AIR PASSENGER TRAFFIC SHOULD BE  
HANDLED AT EACH OF THESE AIRPORTS?**

Airport	Current <sup>9</sup> Share %	Target Share % (Mean)	Variation in Responses
LAX	75%	54%	The overwhelming majority of respondents, 90%, believe the airport should handle less than its current share. 53% believe LAX should handle between 45% and 55% of the region's air passengers.
John Wayne	10%	13%	The respondents are divided. Half believe the airport should handle its current share or less, but half believe the airport should handle 15% to 25% of the region's air passengers.
Ontario	8%	16%	The majority of respondents, 59%, believe the airport should handle 10% to 15% of the region's air passengers. However, 11% believe the airport should handle its current share or less, and 29% believe it should handle more than 15% of the region's air passengers.
Burbank	6%	8%	The respondents are divided. Half believe the airport should handle its current share or less, but half believe the airport should handle 7% to 20% of the region's air passengers.
Palm Springs	1.5%	3%	The respondents are divided. Half believe the airport should handle its current share or less, but half believe the airport should handle 2% to 15% of the region's air passengers.
Long Beach	<1%	3%	The respondents are divided. Half believe the airport should handle its current share or less, but half believe the airport should handle anywhere from 1% to 21% of the region's air passengers.
Palmdale	<1%	5%	The respondents are divided. A third believe the airport should handle less than 1% of the region's air passengers, a third believe the airport should handle 1% to 5% of the region's air passengers, and a third believe the airport should handle 6% to 25% of the region's air passengers.
Oxnard	<1%	2%	Three-quarters of the respondents believe the airport should handle 1% or less of the region's air passengers.
March Global Port	0%	3%	Half of the respondents believe the airport should handle its current share, and the other half believe the airport should handle a greater share, as much as 15% of the region's air passengers.
San Bernardino (Norton)	0%	4%	The respondents are divided. A third believe the airport should handle its current share, a third believe the airport should handle up to 4% of the region's air passengers, and a third believe the airport should handle more – as much as 15% of the region's air passengers.
El Toro	0%	7%	The respondents are divided. A third believe the airport should handle no air passengers. A third believe the airport should handle .5% to 7% of the region's air passengers. A third believe the airport should handle 10% to 30% of the region's air passengers.

Given the diversity of opinion on the region's aviation infrastructure, Gordon was careful to tailor his anti-LAX message to appeal to specific local concerns. Officials from Riverside and San Bernardino Counties joined Gordon's coalition in the hopes that worsening bottlenecks at LAX would force airlines to provide service at Inland Empire airports – and bring new jobs with them. Some city officials from eastern Los Angeles County joined because they fear that improvements at LAX will mean more flights and more airplane noise for their communities. Other officials from eastern Los Angeles County hope for more air service at Ontario Airport – for them, more convenient by freeway than LAX. City officials in northern Orange County joined in the hopes of pressuring airlines to serve Ontario Airport and to alleviate political pressure for expanded air service at John Wayne Airport. In short, Gordon mobilized officials from communities indirectly impacted by LAX by appealing to the specific interests of those communities. By this method, Gordon assembled a coalition that included officials representing communities across southern California, including most of the region's congressional delegation.

Gordon's coalition successfully orchestrated a SCAG vote challenging the air passenger capacity limits projected in the LAX master plan. Although the regional body has no direct ability shape City of Los Angeles policy at LAX, the vote would have been a black mark had the plan gone before the FAA for its approvals. Covering all his bases, Gordon also persuaded twelve members of southern California's congressional delegation to put FAA officials on notice that they were expected to reject the master plan. Representative Jerry Lewis from Redlands warned that he would question U.S.

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta about LAX when the department's budget reached the House Appropriations Committee.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon also made LAX a high-profile issue in the 2001 Los Angeles mayoral election. A neighborhood group opposed to LAX expansion identified 11,000 high propensity voters who claimed they would not vote for a candidate who supported airport expansion. In a crowded field, no candidate could afford to be on the wrong side of that issue, and all six major candidates were persuaded to sign a pledge that they would oppose the master plan if elected. Mayor James Hahn was among the last candidates to do so. Hahn knew LAX needs to be modernized, but he also knew he needed African American voters to win the election. When Congress member Maxine Waters threatened to pull her endorsement, Hahn's inkwell began to flow.

---

### LAWA'S RESPONSE

---

LAWA was wholly unprepared for what transpired. Belatedly, airport department staff and consultants mounted a community outreach program to demonstrate to residents near LAX how the master plan would mitigate the negative impacts of the airport's operations. Call it arrogance, naiveté, or a vestige of the Progressive era, but LAWA's political strategy focused all but entirely on winning approval of the Los Angeles city council. "That's really all you need," explained one LAWA executive late in the summer of 2000. "There is no question in my mind that if the vote were taken today about the LAX master plan, we would get at least eight votes."<sup>11</sup>

Airport executives were keenly aware of the coalition amassing against the master plan, but they clearly underestimated the coalition's potential influence and their own

ability to mount an effective counteroffensive to shape regional elite opinion. One LAWA executive noted, “We can only handle what we control.” Airport executives were cool to the suggestion that LAWA ought to exert leadership in the formulation of a workable regional airport strategy. “In a perfect world. . . we should take a dominant role in trying to help. . . but we have too much to do.” One executive commented that LAWA might be in a better position to exert regional leadership after the master plan won the expected city and FAA approvals, “but let us concentrate on taking care of our own house first and then worry about somebody else later on.”

Had they been so inclined, LAWA officials could have mounted a significant counter attack against opponents of the master plan. By a margin of more than two-to-one, local elected officials believe that there is not sufficient coordination among the appropriate local, state, and federal governments to tackle infrastructure needs in southern California. Moreover, when it comes to making sure that southern California can meet growing demand for air service, the respondents place responsibility most firmly in the hands of LAWA. During the interviews, respondents were told, “The number of passengers using southern California’s airports every year will double within the next twenty years, and the amount of air cargo will grow even faster. Who do you think should be taking responsibility for making sure that the region can meet this demand?” Respondents were read a list of entities and asked whether each should be responsible for the issue or not. Local elected officials expect a variety of entities to exercise leadership on this issue, but like good Progressive politicians, they place the highest expectations on LAWA.

IS THERE SUFFICIENT COORDINATION TO TACKLE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA’S  
INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS?

Yes	No
20	43
30%	65%

**WHO SHOULD BE TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING SURE THE REGION CAN MEET  
INCREASING DEMAND FOR AIR SERVICE?**

	Responsible	Not Responsible
LAWA/LAX	54 82%	10 15%
FAA	50 76%	14 21%
City of Los Angeles	50 76%	14 21%
Federal Government	45 68%	19 29%
California Assembly	38 58%	24 36%
California Senate	38 58%	24 36%
Governor Davis	34 52%	29 44%
SCAG	32 48%	32 48%

Southern California’s local elected officials may have been receptive to arguments in favor of the master plan who argue that LAX represents a major capital investment that should not be permitted to become outmoded as demand grows and technology changes. As one LAWA commissioner joked, “Airports are construction sites where planes land.” Once a municipally-owned airstrip surrounded by bean fields, LAX is the lynchpin of southern California’s aviation system, accommodating three-

quarters of the demand for air travel in the region. Designed to accommodate up to 40 million passengers each year, LAX struggles to handle 67 million passengers and 2.2 million tons of cargo annually. Despite staggering demand for service at LAX, the airport has had no major improvement since 1984. Traffic congestion in and around the airport, lack of parking, flight delays, and runway safety problems are the inevitable result, and these are likely to worsen as the explosive growth of global trade doubles or triples demand for air service over the next fifteen years. Ultimately, bottlenecks at southern California's premier airport will dampen the region's economic growth.<sup>12</sup>

[[RE-WORK]]In general, the respondents would tend to favor a proactive response to the increasing demand on southern California's trade infrastructure. Their view that better coordination is needed aligns with the importance local officials place on infrastructure planning. Survey respondents were asked which of two contrasting views about infrastructure planning they tended to agree with. Some people, respondents were told, believe that by planning for growth, you encourage it. These people argue that developing or modernizing infrastructure, such as freeways, ports, or airports, merely adds additional traffic that quickly restores the previous degree of congestion with a higher volume of traffic. In other words, "if you build it, they will come." By contrast, others believe that growth will occur no matter what, necessitating infrastructure planning and investment. These people contend that inevitable increases in population and trade will drive up the volume of cars, ships, and planes regardless of whether freeways, ports, and airports are developed. In this view, either growth is planned for and negative impacts mitigated, or growth will occur haphazardly and without mitigation. In short, "build it or not, the people are coming."

### ATTITUDES TOWARD INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

If you build it, they will come	Build it or not, the people are coming
11	50
17%	76%

When asked specifically about a number of regionally significant infrastructure projects planned or underway in southern California, most of the respondents anticipate neutral or positive impacts on their communities. Only a handful anticipates negative impacts. In general, they are more upbeat about the impact that major infrastructure projects will have on the economies of their cities than on the quality of life in their cities.

PERCEPTIONS OF MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS ON RESPONDENTS' CITY

Project	Large Positive Impact	Small Positive Impact	Neutral	Small Negative Impact	Large Negative Impact
Economic Impact of the Alameda Corridor and Extensions	14 22%	24 37%	22 34%	1 2%	2 3%
Quality of Life Impact of the Alameda Corridor and Extensions	12 18%	21 32%	24 37%	0 0%	4 6%
Economic Impact of Port Expansion	12 18%	30 46%	19 29%	3 5%	1 2%
Quality of Life Impact of Port Expansion	3 5%	19 29%	33 51%	6 9%	4 6%
Economic Impact of LAX Expansion	5 8%	28 43%	20 31%	5 8%	7 11%
Quality of Life Impact of LAX Expansion	4 6%	19 29%	32 49%	3 5%	7 11%

If airport officials had been interested in assembling a regional coalition in favor of the master plan, LAWA could have emphasized local economic strategies in its appeals. To find out if southern California officials regard airport-related improvements as local economic development strategies, respondents were told, “A lot of people believe that a global economy requires that cities invest in trade and transportation infrastructure,” and asked “Are there any policies or investments by *your* city that are

oriented toward preparing for the global economy?” Without prompting, more than a third referred specifically to LAX, aviation, or airports, including airport ground access.

Had LAWA officials chosen to appeal directly to city officials across the region, they would have gotten some mileage from stressing the role of LAX in facilitating southern California international trade-related economy. Almost all local elected officials interviewed for this study believe international trade has an important impact on the economy and employment at the municipal level. Fifty of 66 respondents identified international trade as very important or somewhat important to the economy and employment in their city.

#### IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE TO CITY’S ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT

Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
17	33	16
26%	50%	24%

When asked specifically about LAX, 65 said the airport is very or somewhat important to the health of the region’s economy. Only 1 said that LAX is not particularly important to the region’s economy. Most respondents also consider LAX to be important to the health of their city’s economy, but there is less unanimity on this point. Forty said LAX is very or somewhat important to their city’s economy, and 25 said LAX is not particularly important. Those who perceive international trade as very important to the economy of their city also tend to perceive LAX as very important to their city’s economy. Those who perceive international trade as not particularly important to their city’s economy also tend to perceive LAX as not particularly important to their city’s economy.

“HOW IMPORTANT IS LAX TO . . .”

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Particularly Important
“ . . . southern California’s economy?”	58 88%	7 11%	1 2%
“ . . . your city’s economy?”	14 21%	26 39%	25 38%

In the effort to win city approval for the master plan, LAWA officials had been stressing the airport’s importance to southern California’s economy, and evidently local official beyond Los Angeles city limits heard their argument. It was an easy case for LAWA to make. LAX is southern California’s premiere platform for exporting locally produced, high value-added goods and services to markets around the world. In 1999, \$36 billion in merchandise exports departed from LAX, including such high value-added products as electronics, automotive parts, high fashion apparel, and perishable foods. By comparison, in 1999, the twin ports at Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors handled export shipments valued at \$28.4 billion. Although cargo and passenger traffic at LAX has dipped slightly in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks and the current economic downturn, in an economy increasingly characterized by global trade and investment, just-in-time production and distribution, and more frequent air shipping, the importance of LAX to regional prosperity is likely to grow.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the victory won by Gordon’s coalition, it should come as little surprise that the respondents reported by a three-to-two margin that failing to improve LAX would harm the region’s economy.

“IF THE IMPROVEMENTS NOW BEING CONSIDERED AT LAX ARE BLOCKED. . .”

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
“...it would hurt the regional economy.”	15 23%	21 32%	16 24%	8 12%
“...it would hurt the quality of life.”	7 11%	22 33%	23 35%	9 14%

Most elected officials concede that the burdens imposed by the operation of infrastructure fall more heavily on some communities than on others, though only about a fifth of the respondents believe that major infrastructure projects erode the quality of life in nearby communities. However, most officials believe it is worth trading lower economic growth for quality of life improvements. Moreover, almost three-quarters of the respondents believe that some infrastructure projects are so crucial to the region’s economic health that they should be built even in the face of local opposition. Almost all elected officials say they would be more willing to accept the burdens of an infrastructure project if it were obvious that other communities were also accepting their share. In sum, although most local elected officials are at least as concerned with their city’s quality of life as with their city’s economic well-being, they would be receptive to regional leadership on the development and improvement of trade infrastructure.

## ATTITUDES REGARDING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF INFRASTRUCTURE

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Sometimes it is worth trading lower economic growth for improved quality of life.	24 36%	32 48%	4 6%	4 6%
In general, major infrastructure projects tend to erode the quality of life in nearby communities.	4 6%	10 15%	28 42%	21 32%
Some projects are so crucial to the economic health of the entire region that they should be built even in the face of local opposition.	32 48%	15 23%	7 11%	8 12%
As a policy maker, I would be willing to accept the burdens of an infrastructure project if it were obvious other communities were doing their part too.	41 62%	16 24%	3 5%	3 5%

---

## THE PRACTICE OF POLITICS IN THE FRAGMENTED METROPOLIS

---

In the aftermath of the quadruple airplane hijackings last September, LAWA planners were sent back to the drawing board to design a new master plan focused not on increasing the capacity of LAX but on improving airport security. In a stunning policy reversal, LAWA executive director Lydia Kennard announced two weeks after the attacks, “Clearly the need for expansion has dissipated, if not evaporated. But we have an airport that’s functionally obsolete from a security and safety standpoint.”<sup>14</sup>

Formal government structures gave the master plan every advantage, yet the plan was all but dead by the time last year’s terrorist attacks made airport security the top priority for LAWA planners. Putting aside the advisability of Gordon’s goal – LAX is in fact a critical economic engine for the region – his political strategy offers important

lessons for leadership in a fragmented metropolis. In brief, the Gordon Model of regional politics begins with the understanding that formal structures shape the parameters for an effective political strategy. Political strategies may seek to focus on direct decision makers, voters, and actors with indirect influence. Enlisting the support of indirect decision makers is best accomplished through direct, specially tailored personal appeals. In the case of Gordon's geographically based coalition, appeals based on local issues proved effective. Other coalitions require appeals to other interests – ethnic interests, environmental concerns, homeowner groups, labor unions, economic sectors, and so forth. What was particularly remarkable about Gordon's efforts is that he was able to enlist coalition members without tangible benefits to offer in exchange – only a vision of possible benefits in a distant and uncertain future.

Variations of the Gordon Model are evident in other instances when ambitious leaders have sought to advance regionally significant objectives. Officials at the Alameda Corridor Transit Authority neutralized opposition among southeast Los Angeles cities – formally through the court system and informally by approaching officials with offers of selective benefits for their cities. Supporters of the planned Ahmanson Ranch residential project are mobilizing Latino elected officials from densely populated areas of Los Angeles County in favor of a more equitable distribution of new housing development.

The Gordon Model has a number of implications for governance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Los Angeles. First, to the extent that a leader is necessary to champion the issue, many worthwhile objectives simply will not be achieved. Second, regional leadership is likely to emerge on an issue-by-issue basis, dependent on the interests and ambitions of the

potential leaders. Third, regional coalitions are temporary, fragile, and based on perceived self-interest. Fourth, southern California has a number of assets that can be mobilized for regional objectives. These include regional authorities such as SCAG, the AQMD, and the MTA. Several leading news media outlets regularly focus on regional issues. We have excellent universities and institutions like the Haynes Foundation that are increasingly focused on regional issues. Most importantly, our elected officials are receptive to regional issues, and we have a pool of talented and ambitious people capable of effective leadership.

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Winston W. Crouch and Beatrice Dinerman, *Southern California Metropolis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> “Sprawl Hits the Wall: Confronting the Realities of Metropolitan Los Angeles” (Los Angeles: Southern California Studies Center, University of Southern California, 2001); Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Myron Orfield and Thomas Luce, “California Metropatterns.” (Minneapolis: Metropolitan Area Research Corporation, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Speaker’s Commission on Regionalism, “The New California Dream: Regional Solutions for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges.” (Sacramento: California Assembly, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Mayor Mike Gordon. 18 April, 2002. Presentation at Loyola Marymount University.

<sup>6</sup> The proportion of elected officials sampled from each county was based on the proportion of the population residing in that county relative to the six-county total population. The elected officials selected from each county were chosen randomly from an alphabetized name list obtained from SCAG.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Katz, ed., *Reflections on Regionalism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Total counts reported in the tables do not always add to 66 because some participants declined to answer the question or because they gave a non-valid response.

<sup>9</sup> LAWA, “Air Transportation in the Los Angeles Region.” 28 February 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Jackson, “12 House Members Oppose Massive Expansion of LAX,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Five LAWA executives and airport commissioners were interviewed between August 22<sup>nd</sup> and September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000. Because they were promised anonymity, we have not identified these officials by name.

---

<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation. *International Trade Trends and Impacts: The Los Angeles Region* (April 2000); Steven P. Erie and Edward Rodriguez “Facing the Challenges of Expanding Southern California’s Global Gateways,” in *Making the Most of Southern California’s Global Engagement*, ed. Gerory F. Treverton and Abraham F. Lowenthal (Los Angeles: Pacific Council on International Policy, forthcoming); LAWA. “Air Transportation in the Los Angeles Region.” 28 February 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Anschuler, Inc. “Economic Sectors Dependent Upon the Activity at LAX: Case Studies of Eight Southern California Firms,” (1996). Report to Los Angeles World Airports; Jack O’Connell, “To Fly High, California’s Economy Must First Get Airborne,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Oldham, “After the Attack,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 September, 2001.