

Arthur D. Levy
4179 Greenwood Avenue
Oakland, California 94602
(415) 433-4949

March 14, 2005

Chairperson Mark McClure and Members of the Commission
City of Oakland Planning Commission
1 City Hall Plaza
Oakland, CA 94612

Re: **Wood Street Development Project (formerly “Central Station”)**
File Nos.: ER 03-0023, GP 04-545, RZ 04-544, CDET 04-032,
Vesting TPM 8551 – 8555

Dear Chairperson McClure and Planning Commissioners:

I am writing to urge you to prevent piecemeal demolition of the 16th Street Station. The Wood Street project proposes to tear down the Southern Pacific interurban platform (known in the reports as the “elevated tracks”) and the baggage wing. These are integral parts of the station.

The plan is therefore for the partial demolition of a concededly historic building. The proponents do not compensate this partial demolition with any guarantee that the remainder of the station will be preserved. They take no responsibility for preserving it, leaving that task to unnamed others. Partial demolition of the station will compromise the ability of the others to succeed in this important challenge. The proponents offer no mitigation or overriding consideration to warrant the partial destruction of this historical resource.

My primary concern is for the platform. The platform is integral to the station and itself a landmark in the urban development of the East Bay. The SP designed the platform especially for its “Red Car” interurban electric trains, which served the East Bay from 1905 until 1941. The platform reflects the station’s unique design as a combined interurban commuter and mainline passenger station. No other train station in the Bay



Passengers waiting on the interurban platform circa 1940.

Area shared this distinctive characteristic, of which the interurban platform is the clearest feature. (While it is conceivable that the SP's mainline stations in Los Angeles or Sacramento may have had planned interurban connections, I have not been able to verify this. Thus, the 16th Street Station may be the only station of its kind in the state.)

The platform is the best surviving remnant of the SP's extensive East Bay interurban electric network. It has statewide significance because it also evokes the SP's Red Car lines in Marin County and in Los Angeles, where the system was known as the Pacific Electric and where equipment from the East Bay and Marin systems continued in service as late as 1960.

I am grateful to the proponents for bringing new housing to west Oakland and for enhancing the property tax base. But the land has an historic train station on it. State law protects historical resources such as the 16th Street Station against heedless development. Carefully crafted mitigation measures or "overriding considerations" are required to warrant the destruction of historical resources.

The proponents have not shown that they could not reasonably modify their plan to accommodate the platform and the baggage wing. Rather, they seem to have applied the CEQA test backwards, that the platform and the baggage wing cannot be reasonably modified to accommodate their preconceived development plan. Creative minds could devise a plan to preserve the station intact and still serve the needs of the new project. The Planning Commission should direct the proponents to come up with a plan that serves Oakland's needs both for housing and for preservation of our heritage.

The proponents intend to leave the task of preserving and reusing the station to as yet unidentified "others." Having left the task of preservation to others, the proponents should leave the method and means for accomplishing the task to others. The proponents should not encumber the others with the proponents' preconceptions, but instead leave them with maximum flexibility to determine the best financing alternative and the best reuse of the station facilities. The proponents should not hobble the others' efforts by beginning demolition of the station even before the others have been able to plan for its preservation. Through demolition, the proponents will deprive the others of valuable tax credits that could be used to finance the renewal of the station. They will also be predetermining the others' ability to integrate the interurban platform and baggage wing into a new project.

The same concerns apply to the proposed parcel map, which as an integral part of the project approval is also subject to environmental review. The map includes lot lines drawn directly through these integral elements of the station. The map should not be approved for the same reason the demolition should not be approved. The map assumes the demolition of the interurban platform and the baggage wing; otherwise the map would place the platform and the baggage wing under different ownerships.

WHY I AM INTERESTED IN THE 16TH STATION AND THE PLATFORM



Interurban electric train passing signal tower and approaching platform circa 1940 with mainline tracks in view below at left.

My interest in the 16th Station I owe largely to my now 16-year old son, Daniel. We have explored railroads together, but none with as much enthusiasm as the East Bay's lost electric interurban railroads, the Southern Pacific "Red Cars," the Key System, and the Sacramento Northern. Together, we volunteer our time in cataloging vintage photos of the Key System running in Oakland for the Western Railway Museum at Rio Vista Junction. For his Boy Scout Eagle Project, Daniel is working with the East Bay Regional Parks District to build a permanent signboard at Lake Temescal with text, a map, and photographs commemorating the running of the Sacramento Northern line by Lake Temescal and through Montclair.

Through this father-son experience, I discovered a passion to preserve the remnants of this largely forgotten, but nevertheless remarkable, chapter in Oakland's history. I have been especially struck by the paradox of how critically important the interurbans were in the development of Oakland, and how almost completely forgotten they are. The EIR and associated reports, for example, acknowledge the 16th Street Station as part of the SP's mainline railroad, but make no mention of the reason why the railroad built this unusual second level of tracks, much less the interurban electric railroad they served.

Tearing down the interurban platform deals yet another blow to this loss of community memory. Every reasonable effort should be made to maintain the interurban platform as a monumental reminder for our children and future generations of an important chapter in our East Bay history.

WHY THE PLATFORM IS SO IMPORTANT TO OAKLAND AND THE EAST BAY

Perhaps more than any other structure in the East Bay, the 16th Street Station is emblematic of the rapid development of Oakland and its sister East Bay cities in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. People commonly associate the station with the SP's mainline service and with Oakland



as the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad. But it was not the SP's mainline service, or at least not the mainline alone, that fired the SP's ambitious plan for a monumental station in the Beaux Arts style, clad in sierran granite.

The SP designed the 16th Street station as the centerpiece of another railroad altogether, the SP's extensive system of interurban electric cars that served the East Bay for 35 years until 1941. This system played a central role in the rapid development of neighborhoods and commercial corridors in Oakland, Alameda, and Berkeley during this entire period. One of the very few, and by far the best, surviving vestiges of this great interurban electric railroad is the interurban platform still standing at the station.



At the turn of the Twentieth Century, electrification of suburban railroad lines swept the country in much the same way the internet presented itself a century later. We know that the internet appeared on the scene not just as a revolutionary mode of communication, but also as transformative of our way of life.

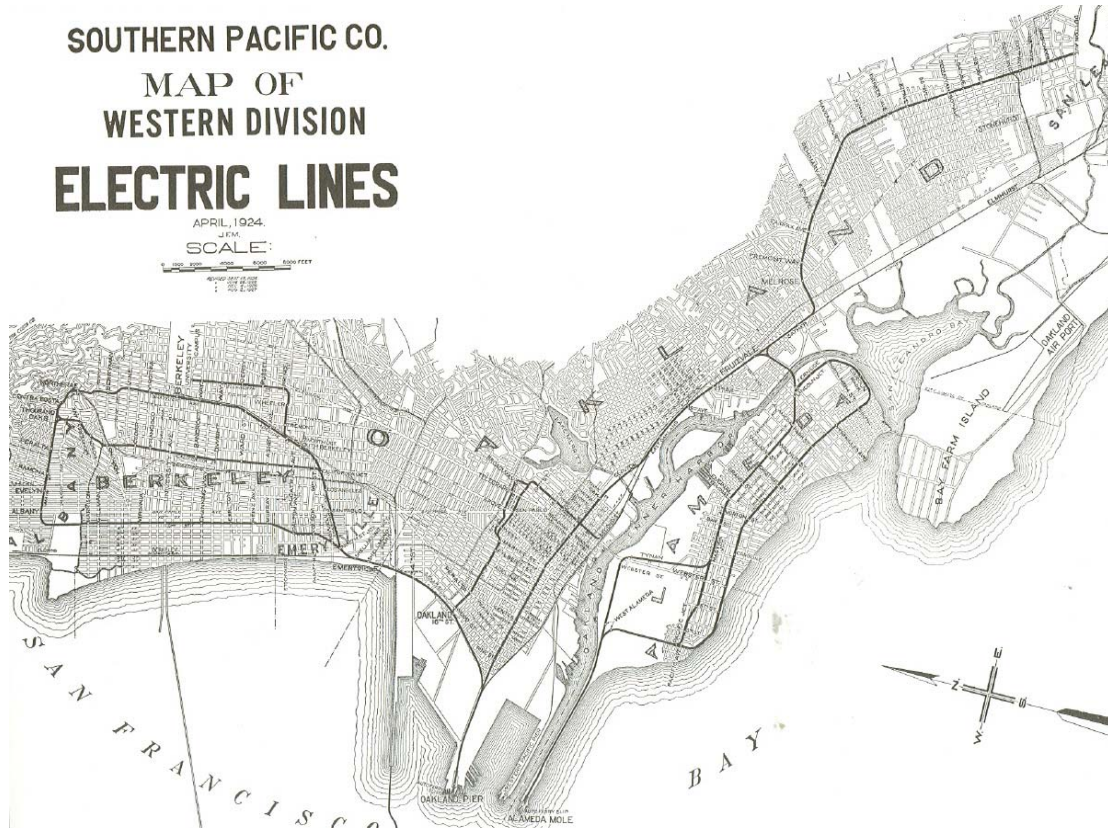
Likewise, a hundred years ago, railway electrification provided a revolutionary and previously unthinkable mode of personal mobility. Interurban electric railroads first enabled the suburban development that continues to this day, and of which Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda are early and prime examples.

In the years following the 1906 fire, the three electric "interurban" railroads of the East Bay provided a pre-automotive, yet thoroughly modern, transit spine that spurred the real estate boom out of which the East Bay first took the shape we recognize today. The SP's "Red Cars," the Key System, and the Sacramento Northern knit the East Bay together and, linked by long piers extending out to meet the transbay ferries, provided rapid, clean, and quiet commute service to jobs in San Francisco's financial district.



SP's Willow station on Lincoln Avenue in Alameda circa 1920

In 1924, the SP had several interurban lines serving Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda:



Interurban service preceded real estate development. After laying the tracks, railroad and other real estate interests then sold the vacant lots lying on either side.



Ninth Street in Berkeley looking north toward Ashby Avenue
circa 1915

On those same lots now lie the East Bay neighborhoods of the teens, twenties, and thirties that still hold so much of the region's charm and character.

The SP grandly conceived and built the 16th Street Station as the central transfer point between the SP mainline and its interurban electrics and as the gateway to and from the newly reborn City of San Francisco itself. To avoid interference and delays and to provide ease of transfer, the SP designed the station to accommodate its steam mainline on the ground and its cutting edge interurban electrics on an elevated platform.



The brand new platform before the construction of connecting ramps in 1915

Mainline passengers could disembark at 16th Street, have their baggage transferred by elevator to the interurban level and catch a fast electric train to San Francisco, downtown Oakland, East Oakland, Alameda, or Berkeley. A suburban passenger from north Berkeley's Thousand Oaks neighborhood could disembark at the station as a central transfer point to another SP line serving Oakland or Alameda, or could ride the rest of the way out to SP's Oakland mole, and complete the commute to his office on Montgomery Street by ferry.



Commuters aboard SP ferry



The SP's Oakland Mole, now the container port

After the construction of the Bay Bridge, the Red Cars joined the Key System and Sacramento Northern Trains in providing transbay service over the lower deck of the bridge from 1939 until the end of SP service in 1941.



Such was the optimism underlying the distinctive design of the 16th Street Station. And although the explosion of the mass-produced automobiles on the scene in the 1920s ultimately proved that optimism's undoing, the electrified rails and the red behemoths that plied them spread suburban development like wildfire. Until the end of service on the eve of the Second World War, the Red Cars spurred the construction of homes and the development of commercial districts as far north as Northbrae in Berkeley, through south Berkeley and Emeryville, as far east as Havenscourt and Dutton Avenue in East Oakland, and throughout Alameda.



San Francisco bound Red Cars on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley near the end of service

Today, the platform remains intact and a perhaps haunting reminder of the rapidity of our societal change. In a simpler time, thousands of passengers waited here on ordinary days for trains to take them to their homes, jobs, friends, and loved ones. The catenary standards, still standing, continue to bear silent witness to this era. Through creative reuse, the “elevated tracks” could serve as a monument to the enduring contributions of the Red Cars and the other lost interurban railways to our East Bay life and heritage.



HOW THE INTERURBAN PLATFORM COULD BE REUSED

The interurban platform could be integrated into a museum and public space with a railroad theme that would commemorate and celebrate the contributions of African-Americans and Asian-Americans to the railroad and to Oakland. A public transportation wing could have exhibits showing the history of public transportation in the East Bay from horsecars through BART and AC Transit. These and potentially other uses could be achieved through creative reuse of the interurban platform and the baggage wing.

Outdoor uses of the platform

- Exhibit space
- Vintage street railway equipment on tracks
- Dining
- Park
- Promenade
- Par course
- Parking on and under platform
- Walking and bicycling paths
- Ramp for bus transit via 14th Street and 18th Street
- Ramp for eventual light rail loop to 12th & Broadway/West Oakland BART stations
- Views of and possible integration with the signal tower

Indoor uses of the platform (enclose with galleria-style canopy)

- Shops and restaurants
- Exhibit space/railroad and cultural
- Meeting rooms
- Offices

HOW THE PLAN COULD BE CHANGED TO ALLOW PRESERVATION:

- Change parking lot plans
 - Move parking lots to rear
 - Put some parking under the elevated tracks or on them
 - Centralize residential around plazas
- Emphasize public transit and bicycle
 - Use/reserve elevated tracks for this purpose

- Transit service to Parcel 9
- Compensate, adjust, and reduce residential density as needed
 - Compensate loss of residential units with commercial increases
 - Compensate loss of residential units with additional units for BUILD on Parcel 3
 - Residential density on Parcel 4 is already high

DEVELOPERS' JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DEMOLITION OF THE PLATFORM

<u>Justification</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Overriding Consideration?</u>
Allow continuation of 16 th Street in keeping with the historic neighborhood street grid	16 th Street has never historically followed this alignment. The historic use has been as a baggage wing and interurban platform	NO
Provide emergency access to the Project Area from Wood Street and the frontage road	Could be provided at another location, 18 th Street or otherwise at the rear of the development	NO
Facilitate public access to the future rear entrance of the Main Hall	This decision should be left to those who will preserve the Main Hall	NO
Provide access directly to the frontage road from future projects in Development Areas 6, 7 and 8 in order to minimize traffic impacts on the surrounding neighborhood	Could be provided at another location, 18 th Street or otherwise at the rear of the development	NO

CONCLUSION



Ten-car football special on Encinal Avenue in Alameda

No one can guarantee that the 16th Street Station will be saved. But we can protect against needless acts that will damage the station's architectural and historical integrity and its prospects for preservation. The Commission should send the proponents back to the drawing board to come up with a plan that will not allow piecemeal demolition of the station and, particularly, the interurban platform. Only then will Oakland's hope of maintaining this irreplaceable historical resource will be protected.

Sincerely,

Arthur Levy