SPUR brings people together to develop solutions to the big problems cities face.
We work across the Bay Area, with offices in San Francisco, San Jose and Oakland.
We do our work in three ways:

9 Research
We identify pressing problems and develop strategies to solve them.

14 Education
We engage people in the life of their city.

21 Advocacy
We work with decision-makers to get our proposals put into practice.
RESEARCH

SPUR Report: Seamless Transit

The Bay Area’s public transit system is notoriously fragmented. Riders contend with more than two dozen different operators with divergent maps, schedules and fares — not to mention uncoordinated capital planning and investment. SPUR’s report Seamless Transit proposed a set of recommendations to make the region’s transit function like one rational, easy-to-use system. Our proposals gained support from Bay Area residents, employers and city leaders who want to grow transit usage. It also sparked a national conversation, with coverage in The New York Times and The Washington Post. In response to the study, transit agencies and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission have begun collaborating to coordinate their transit information, create regional fare passes that work on multiple operators and design new transit hubs for seamless connections.

Getting to Key South Bay Destinations

Santana Row and Valley Fair are magnets for millions of visitors who come to shop, eat, work and people-watch every year. Due to their economic success, both are planning to expand. A case study in retrofitting suburbia, these retail and entertainment destinations bump up against low-density development and are primarily accessible by car only. We asked the question: How can it be easier for people to get to, from and through Santana Row and Valley Fair without having to drive alone — or even drive at all? SPUR convened a workshop and called for policies, programs and incentives that can help people get from place to place. We are pleased that the city is now working with the developers to implement a transportation demand management program and invest in improvements in the area for all transportation modes.

SPUR Report: A Downtown for Everyone

SPUR completed its trilogy of policy reports on the downtowns of the Bay Area’s three central cities with A Downtown for Everyone, recommendations for the future of downtown Oakland. This was the first publication from SPUR’s Oakland office. In it we argued that downtown Oakland has the transportation infrastructure and land availability to support significant growth, but it needs the right rules and vision in place to shape that growth in a way that will benefit everyone. Our goal was to influence the City of Oakland’s Downtown Specific Plan process, which kicked off at the end of 2015. The report garnered significant media coverage and has framed many of the key issues in Oakland, including preserving space for employment downtown, requiring impact fees for new development and re-envisioning older infrastructure like Interstate 980.
Many of the Bay Area’s big challenges result from our failure to plan for growth in the places where we’ve invested in transportation. Part of the problem is that one regional agency focuses on land use (the Association of Bay Area Governments, or ABAG) while another focuses on transportation (the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, or MTC). When MTC proposed merging the planning departments of the two agencies, it opened up a discussion about the future of regional planning in the Bay Area. SPUR spent many hours in conversation with ABAG and MTC, as well as leaders outside of government, and produced our own report arguing for a full merger of the two agencies. Ultimately, ABAG and MTC voted to move forward with a study of a full merger.
San Jose’s St. James Park dates from the 1870s, but in recent years it has been hampered by neglect and homelessness. To develop a strategy for transforming the park, SPUR worked with MJM Management to engage city departments and local stakeholders. Drawing on national models, we mapped out a multi-phase process to capture revenue from booming development nearby and create a St. James Park Conservancy to enhance maintenance, programming, park use and capital improvements. In response to our recommendations, the San Jose City Council passed key legislation to establish this framework, which will help turn St. James Park into the gem the city deserves.

Envisioning a Second Transbay Rail Crossing

This year Bay Bridge traffic delays and transbay BART ridership broke all records. Significant investments are being made in the core transportation network over the coming years, such as three-door train cars for BART, the modernization of Caltrain and the construction of the Transbay Transit Center. But transit may still burst at the seams in the Transbay Corridor thanks to continued population and job growth. Regional conversations about a second transbay rail crossing have prompted leaders including the mayors of San Francisco and Oakland to call for further study. Through research and convening, SPUR is leading a dialogue on how to design a second rail crossing in a way that will help cities on both sides of the Bay grow gracefully and become more connected.

SPUR Report: Healthy Food Within Reach

One in 10 adults in the Bay Area struggle to consistently find three meals a day; more than half of all adults are overweight or obese; and many of the region’s residents live in neighborhoods where fast food and convenience stores abound, while grocery stores are scarce. In February 2015, SPUR published Healthy Food Within Reach, with broad strategies and specific recommendations to help local policy makers make it easier for Bay Area residents to find, afford and choose healthy food. To advance one of the report’s main recommendations, SPUR is now organizing a pilot project for improving the affordability of fruits and vegetables for low-income families in grocery stores.
SPUR Comes to Oakland

In 2015, SPUR began working in Oakland. We published our first Oakland policy report, A Downtown for Everyone, and launched a hugely popular series of public programs around the city. The demand for SPUR events quickly made it clear that our growing Oakland-based community would need a permanent home. So in early 2016, we opened our doors at 1544 Broadway, a place for the Oakland community to come together around urban issues and help shape the future of the city. In the coming years, our downtown storefront location will allow us to greatly expand our calendar of forums and community gatherings, develop more original programming and inaugurate exhibitions. We are extremely gratified by Oakland’s warm welcome and ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Our heartfelt thanks to those who made the opening of SPUR Oakland possible:
The S. D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation
The Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation
The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation
The Walter & Elise Haas Fund
TCA Architects
Gensler
Lowney Architecture
Integral Engineering
California Commercial and Investment Group
Signature Development Group
BRIDGE Housing
1544 Events
BluePrint Studios
Chop Bar
City Slicker Farms
Walk Oakland Bike Oakland
Blue Bottle Coffee
Numi Tea
BitterSweet Cafe
Hugh Groman Catering

Shaping the Future of Downtown Oakland

In a fitting first event at our new 1544 Broadway home, SPUR hosted a major public outreach effort for the City of Oakland: a weeklong open studio for the Downtown Oakland Specific Plan. The multi-day charrette offered a great opportunity for Oaklanders to share their vision for how their downtown should evolve as a place. Over the eight days, hundreds of people came and helped provide guidance on downtown’s future, linking land use, transportation, economic development, public spaces, cultural arts and social equity.
Empowering San Francisco Voters

Each election, SPUR provides in-depth analysis and recommendations for every measure on the San Francisco ballot. Thousands of voters rely on the SPUR Voter Guide for informed recommendations that focus on outcomes, not ideology. This year, in an election dominated by the city’s housing crisis, voters agreed with all of SPUR’s positions on housing-related measures. We are encouraged by what appears to be a broad pattern of voter support for creating more housing for residents at all income levels.
Finding the Way to Downtown San Jose

Our 2014 report *The Future of Downtown San Jose* encouraged the city to bring more people and activity downtown by investing in clearer signage, more real-time transit information and better design. With support from the Knight Foundation, the city is now taking big steps to make that happen. In partnership with experts from Walk Your City and City ID, San Jose is working on a permanent wayfinding system for downtown. SPUR supported the effort by hosting City ID for a series of walk audits and charrettes that focused on understanding pedestrian needs. In advance of the new wayfinding system, the research was road-tested by an estimated 1 million people when it was used to develop a visitors' map for Super Bowl 50.

Designing a Better Experience for Transit Riders

Making transit work better doesn’t have to mean building large, expensive projects. We can make significant system improvements through better visual design alone. To bring together the worlds of design and public transit, SPUR convened Transit+Design, a day of workshops and presentations to explore the future of design and public transportation. Contributors championed the ways that excellent visual design can make transit more effective and shed some light on plans to prioritize quality transportation design here in the Bay Area.

Putting Public Life Back Into Public Spaces

Public space should invite people from all walks of life to meet and spend time together, find peaceful respite or enjoy being “alone together.” But why does our public realm often fail to bring us together? With sponsorship from the Knight Foundation, SPUR hosted Gehl Studio’s Jeff Risom for a live-broadcast conversation exploring the relationship between built form and public life. More than 500 people joined in, either in person at the SPUR Urban Center or around the region through our online broadcast.

Urbanism From Within

One challenge to solving San Francisco’s housing shortage is the close link between the city’s identity and a romantic vision of Victorian housing. But what if we could add thousands of new homes without disrupting this image? Urbanism From Within — an exhibition co-presented by California College of the Arts, the San Francisco Planning Department and OpenScope Studio — examined how legalizing secondary units within existing housing types could help solve the city’s housing shortage.
Big Win: SF Voters Support Affordable Housing Bond
In a year when the affordable housing crisis was top of mind for everyone, SPUR helped lead a winning $310 million bond campaign for affordable housing in San Francisco, gaining support from more than 73 percent of voters. Funds from the bond will help create and preserve affordable housing for low-, moderate- and middle-income San Franciscans, as well as contribute to rehabilitating two HOPE SF public housing developments. Supporting the creation of housing for residents of all income levels is core to SPUR’s work, and the housing bond is a big step in the right direction.

Bringing BART to Silicon Valley
BART Silicon Valley is the largest transportation investment that the South Bay will make for decades. The project will bring four BART stations to San Jose at Berryessa (Phase I) and Alum Rock, downtown and Diridon (Phase II). SPUR continues to champion a bold vision for BART station areas by shaping the planning efforts. This year we advocated for federal funding in Washington; supported county sales tax efforts; helped the city look at how people will get to and from stations; facilitated research on the potential for transit-oriented development; and facilitated collaborative planning efforts by bringing together BART, the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority and city leadership.

A Housing Strategy for Oakland
Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf established a Housing Implementation Cabinet to make recommendations for addressing the city’s housing crisis. The cabinet focused on three efforts: protecting existing low-income residents from displacement by expanding renter protections and making existing renter services work better; converting existing homes to permanent affordability by purchasing and/or rehabilitating units that are home to low-income families; and adding new housing by building new market-rate and affordable housing, as well as establishing new impact fees and creating a policy to guide the use of public lands. SPUR was deeply involved with the cabinet, helping to refine policy proposals and determine targets for housing production and preservation. We look forward to working with the mayor to make the cabinet recommendations a reality in 2016.
Getting the Rules Right for Growth

Recent years have seen a flurry of planning advocacy and implementation efforts across San Francisco. While not as headline-grabbing as a ballot measure or a major neighborhood plan, better planning codes and cleaner approval processes help shape a city in profound ways. This year’s fine-grained reforms — cleaning up the planning code and designating new transit-oriented commercial districts on Fillmore and Divisadero — will help to improve the quantity and quality of development in San Francisco by reducing parking requirements, removing density limits and giving height bonuses to allow for tall ground floors, which help foster walking. SPUR will continue to support city efforts that push San Francisco’s neighborhoods to grow in the right way.

San Francisco Welcomes the In-Laws

This was a big year for in-law units in San Francisco. The city expanded last year’s legislation — which allowed new in-law units in the Castro neighborhood — to the whole of Districts 3 and 8, as well as to buildings undergoing mandatory seismic retrofits. SPUR has long supported in-law units as a low-impact way to increase density across the city and meet the housing needs of many kinds of San Franciscans. Of course we’d like to see them permitted across the entire city, but this year’s legislation was a big step.

Cracking the Code on Urban Form in San Jose

Municipal codes are the DNA of cities; they generate the physical shape of our buildings and streets and determine whether our neighborhoods are welcoming and walkable — or not. To encourage better buildings and streets in San Jose, SPUR went deep into the city’s codes — including the zoning code, fire code, public works code and more — and proposed line-by-line revisions. Our white paper Cracking the Code recommended code changes based on an in-depth study of codes and standards in comparable cities around the country. If these changes are enacted, new buildings in San Jose will be more urban, and its streets will be more walkable, all adding up to a better city.

Muni’s Great Leap Forward

More than a decade ago, SPUR helped develop a vision for a rapid transit network in San Francisco. That vision evolved to become Muni Forward, a set of projects and policies that have lifted approval ratings for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency to a 10-year high. Muni Forward includes route changes and service improvements (like red transit-only lanes); improved frequency and reliability on the routes that serve most riders; a new, easy-to-read transit map; an updated fleet of vehicles; improved safety and accessibility in line with San Francisco’s Vision Zero goal to eliminate traffic deaths; and technology to integrate transit with traffic signals and bring real-time information to riders.
Planning an Urban Future for San Jose

One of SPUR’s key goals is to help San Jose achieve the urban aspirations it adopted in its 2011 general plan, Envision 2040. The ambitious plan intends to accommodate the majority of 400,000 jobs and 120,000 housing units in walkable “urban villages” located along major lines of transit. However, no new urban village plans have been approved to date. In November, the city launched a review process to track progress and make some course adjustments, inviting SPUR to sit on the task force that will recommend changes to the general plan. We are hoping to make Envision 2040 more workable for real-world development while maintaining the plan’s urban vision.
Ideas and Action for a Better City

When the founders of SPUR gathered after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, it was to help rebuild the great city that had been lost. It’s easy to take this effort for granted today, knowing what emerged from the ashes, but it wasn’t obvious at the time that they would succeed.

Over the century that followed, civic leaders came together at SPUR to take on the greatest challenges: building new transportation systems to enable the region to function as it grew; saving undeveloped land by channeling development into compact areas; inventing new models of affordable housing; building up local government’s capacity to serve the needs of a changing population.

We know from this experience that often the big moves in the life of a city are the work of generations. And this is part of our job as a civic organization: to stay with things for as long as they take.

We strive to be both visionary and practical in our work: to come up with ideas that will allow the cities of the Bay Area to make progress on the big issues; to be honest about the trade-offs we face; to learn from other cities when we can; to focus on ideas and results rather than on the personalities involved in public discussions.

This past year we opened our Oakland office, joining San Francisco and San Jose — and putting SPUR in a position to work on the major urban policy issues in the three largest cities of the Bay Area. We undertook this expansion, one of the most profound changes in SPUR’s history, because we were compelled by the need to think bigger about the challenges and opportunities we face as a region.

The cities of the Bay Area are bound together not just by the Bay but by a shared economy, a shared housing market and — we believe — a shared commitment to living out the highest ideals of cultural openness, economic opportunity and ecological stewardship. We have the aspiration to show what city life can be like when it lives up to its greatest potential.

SPUR relies on a community of members and donors who share these aspirations and have made the decision to invest in our capacity to help realize them. We are grateful for your trust. This annual report provides a snapshot of the work in progress.

Gabriel Metcalf
President and CEO
SPUR Annual Contributors

We gratefully acknowledge the generous contributions to SPUR’s operating funds made by the following organizations and individuals.

We apologize for any omissions or inaccuracies in this listing and will publish any corrections in a future issue of The Urbanist. This list represents gifts made in 2015.
What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? The resurgence of interest in urban living, even in cities with a more suburban character thoughly, a majority of people in these cities don’t know their own urban centers very well and have a negative view toward them.

If you could transport one thing from another city to the Bay Area, what would it be? A comprehensive and integrated transportation system built with our future in mind.

What, in your opinion, is the biggest challenge facing the Bay Area right now? Affordability. What’s the best way to get to know your city? By walking.

What in your opinion is the biggest challenge facing the Bay Area right now? Mobility. Our transportation network, especially public transit, is woefully inadequate to cope with our economic growth and the associated development.

What SPUR initiative are you most passionate about? Our walkable cities, especially SPUR’s report The Future of Downtown San Jose.

What’s the best way to get to know your city? Start in the residential neighborhood along North First Street, all the way to the Arts District.

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The Hearst Corporation
The Unity Council

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What recent trend in cities has caused you the most surprise? The hype about “smart cities,” which is heavily driven by the public transit system. What SPUR initiative are you most passionate about? To better stewardship of water. What’s the best way to get to know your city? take a tour with SPUR.
The increased use of technology for reporting, notification and accessibility to local government has impressed me. What, in your opinion, is the biggest challenge facing the Bay Area, what would it be?

What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? Where (and how) do people work, shop, play, and practice self-care? And how has this new city synergy that is emerging from the placement of logics — is it evolving, finding, and forward-thinking at the same time?

What's the biggest way to get to know your city? To the people that work, live, go to school and raise a family here.

What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? The dwindling of ethnic diversity and of families with children.

If you could transport one thing from another city to the Bay Area, what would it be? I have not seen that one thing … yet!

What is your opinion, the biggest challenge facing the Bay Area right now?

Edward A. Rosen & Valerie King

Wendy Black & Karen O. Oakland City Council, SPUR

The best way to get to know your city? On your walking shoes and in my case, I like to dust off my running shoes and hit the streets for a jog.

The Economic Prosperity Strategy.

What recent trend in Cities has surprised you the most? The displacement of logics.

Robert A. Wilkins

President & CEO, UC Berkeley East Bay

What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? To get to know any city, I always go on public transportation and ride from one end to the other, visiting a public campus or green space.
What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? In the Bay Area it was the push for more affordable and low-income housing. This is an area that has been around for years. Now all of a sudden it's become a major topic.

If you could transport one thing from another city to the Bay Area right now? What's the best way to get to know your city? It's a big question!

What SPUR initiative are you most passionate about? Supporting San Francisco's Central Car Pool, which is a solution to navigate the shortage of parking spaces. It opens up space and upgrades alleys. This is one of the keys to the future of San Francisco.

What's the best way to get to know your city? Walking. Your attention is occupied with your feet. Walking happens at a great pace and you see everything, you are a part of the community. A SPUR Walk is a great opportunity to see the city and in the Mission walk straight up to the top of 17th Street.

David Baker

David Baker Architecture

San Francisco City Board

SPUR

What recent trend in cities has surprised you the most? I'm (pleasingly) shocked that people seem to be coming around to the idea that cities should be designed to accommodate bike and pedestrian users.

If you could transport one thing from another city to the Bay Area right now? Adding more housing of all types. Presumably SPUR would be fully on board with this idea.

What's the best way to get to know your city? I would probably say walking.

What SPUR initiative are you most passionate about? I'm not sure yet, but I'm interested in anything that opens up space and upgrades alleys. This is one of the keys to the future of San Francisco.
Through research, education and advocacy, SPUR promotes good planning and good government in the San Francisco Bay Area. We are a member-supported nonprofit organization.

Join us.

www.spur.org