

# THE POWERLESS BROKERS

*Why California Can't Build Transit*



August 2025



# **The Powerless Brokers: Why California Can't Build Transit**

## Executive Summary:

In California, building transit is slow and expensive. The transit we need to meet our climate and mobility goals too often remains aspirational.

Even when public transit projects are approved by elected officials or through ballot measures by the voters themselves, transit authorities do not have the power to construct them. Before they can build, they must seek third-party permits from local governments, special districts, state agencies, and public and private utilities.

This report focuses on the many third-party permitting challenges facing transit that are arbitrary, excessive, and avoidable. Within this report are case studies from across California documenting permitting issues that added costs and delays for needed transit projects. They range from the largest project in California – High-Speed Rail – to a small busway on the central coast.

The report title is a play on Robert Caro's legendary biography of Robert Moses, "The Power Broker." While Moses was the infamous and unstoppable master builder of New York, many transit agencies in California struggle to build, and find themselves powerless.

In recent decades, many reforms were adopted to prevent the abuses of Moses-style planning. Those same reforms have created their own challenges, adding an array of new hurdles and veto points, limiting state capacity to get projects done quickly and cost-effectively.

For California to secure abundant public transit, it must empower transit authorities to build. This report contains a variety of recommendations, including to:

- Reassign permitting responsibility from third-parties to transit authorities themselves,
- Incentivize local governments to prioritize transit, adopt transparent standards, and streamline permitting,
- Extend CEQA exemptions for sustainable transportation, and
- Encourage more transit leadership from Caltrans.

Find the full report online at <https://www.circulatesd.org/powerlessbrokers>.

