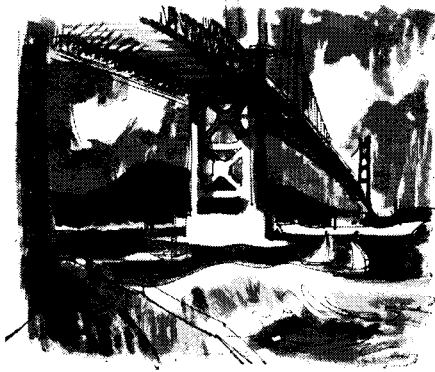


San Francisco
by Helen Drew



The Wandering Paths Of a Transit Bill

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FANS of cowboy drama find it easy to distinguish the hero (he wears a white hat) from the villain (his hat is black). Things are not that simple in Washington. Misled by the stereotypes, people sometimes can't tell their friends from their foes. This was illustrated by the developments that led to the House passage on June 25 of the Johnson administration's urban transit bill, which had been abandoned for dead last winter, long after it passed the Senate.

Some supporters of the bill fell into the trap of labeling the House Rules Committee the villain that sought to obstruct it. A few days before the showdown House vote, for example, a *New York Times* editorial exulted that the bill was "finally released from the suffocating clutches of the Rules Committee."

The truth was that the Rules Committee had been ready for more than a year to clear the bill. It delayed action only to oblige the Democratic leader of the House, Speaker John W. McCormack. In the end, the bill was saved by lobbyists who dragged a timid Speaker and an apathetic White House into a fight for the bill they had tried to avoid.

In submitting the urban transit bill to Congress last year, President Kennedy said it was designed to solve "one of the most urgent problems facing the nation and this Congress." Supporters of Federal aid say that transit systems in all major cities need extension and point out that last year there were sixty-nine cities with a population of twenty-five thousand or more that lacked even busses.

The legislation provided Federal aid for subway, rail, or bus systems. Its premise was that "fare box" revenue could finance operation, but not the heavy cost of installing new systems. In its final form, the bill would authorize Federal grants of up to \$375 million over a three-year period for new construction or

equipment to expand or modernize transportation systems in urban areas. The Federal grants would cover two-thirds of the net cost, and state or local agencies would have to put up the rest. Opponents of the bill insisted that any needed subsidies were a local, not a national, responsibility. Moreover, the \$375-million price tag was only a down payment, they argued, and the program ultimately would cost many billions of Federal dollars.

AT FIRST the bill advanced swiftly. The Senate passed it in April, 1963. In the same month the bill was cleared 22-7 by the urban-minded House Banking and Currency Committee. That brought the measure to the House Rules Committee. There action stopped. Democratic leaders felt that if the bill was brought to the House floor, it would drown in the wave of budget-cutting sentiment that had been provoked by the administration's plea for the biggest tax cut in history.

This January, President Johnson included funds for mass transit in his budget for fiscal 1965. In his housing message, he said that early enactment of the bill was basic to the development and redevelopment of our cities. But neither the President nor Speaker McCormack—for different reasons—lifted a finger to speed the bill.

Faced with inadequate time for enactment of all of his legislative program, Johnson decided to reserve White House pressure for more popular or more urgent election-year measures. Speaker McCormack had warned the President that the House would vote down the bill and Johnson did not want to jeopardize his reputation for victories in Congress. For his part, McCormack dreaded the urban transit bill as a possible further threat to his prestige as House leader of the administration forces. Rather than risk a defeat, he