

## National City Wins Big In SANDAG Smart Growth Grant Program

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By [Andrew Bowen](#)



Photo by [Roland Lizarondo](#)

Above: Cars driving on the Interstate-5 freeway are seen behind the 24th Street trolley platform in National City, July 12, 2018.

National City is set to receive nearly \$8 million this year through a competitive grant program meant to encourage smart growth, biking, walking and transit ridership — an impressive haul for a relatively small city, and a validation of its efforts to encourage new home building.

The grants are part of the San Diego Association of Governments' [active transportation and smart growth incentive programs](#), and are funded by the agency's Transnet sales tax extended by voters in 2004. SANDAG staff recommended the grant awards, but the funding must be approved by its board of directors.

"We're absolutely thrilled," Steve Manganiello, an engineer and director of public works for National City, said of the funding recommendations. "The reality is we don't have a lot of funding available to do new projects, so we rely heavily



on these competitive grant programs ... It's going to allow us to provide some much-needed infrastructure enhancements for our community."

National City, with a population of just over 60,000, is recommended for about \$7.9 million to fund eight different capital and planning projects. That's more money than any other jurisdiction in the county — including the city of San Diego, which has more than 20 times National City's population. The projects recommended for funding include new bike racks, new or improved bike lanes and wider sidewalks.

One project would redesign the streetscape for a part of Roosevelt Avenue that's zoned for high-density development in National City's [downtown specific plan](#), updated last November. The northern end of the street, which runs parallel to Interstate 5, is currently home to a motel, vacant lots and long-term parking for freight trucks.

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The city's plans include wider sidewalks, improved street lighting, new landscaping and extensions of bike lanes to create a safer bike route to a nearby trolley station. Manganiello said the project is meant to entice developers into redeveloping the adjacent properties and to allow new residents to be less dependent on cars.

"If you're going to encourage high density, the only way to accommodate that without completely oversaturating the transportation network with cars is to provide amenities other than driving," Manganiello said.

National City has some built-in advantages in the competitive grant process: It's served by the Blue Line trolley and multiple bus routes, making it ripe for the kind of transit-oriented development SANDAG wants to encourage.

But a big portion of National City's success in competing for grant funding is its willingness to put forward ambitious projects, and to [lower regulatory barriers](#) to development.



Photo by [Roland Lizarondo](#)

National City Director of Public Works Steve Manganiello, right, walks with KPBS reporter Andrew Bowen along a street planned for high-density development, July 12, 2018.

Ana Castro Reynoso is transportation justice policy advocate for the Environmental Health Coalition, a nonprofit that has advocated for the city's low-income residents for decades. She said the active transportation funding for National City

could be a good thing — but that SANDAG has not earned its environmental bona fides.

"National City is a community that has been the victim of environmental racism and inequitable transportation planning in particular for a very long time," she said.

The construction of Interstate 5 through National City's core left it with some of the worst air quality in the state, contributing to higher rates of asthma, limiting public access to San Diego Bay and leaving a constant drone of noise pollution audible throughout much of the city.

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Castro Reynoso said SANDAG's active transportation and smart-growth grant funding is a small fraction of its overall spending, and that any funding give to National City projects is overshadowed by SANDAG's plans to widen the freeway, which is likely to worsen air quality.

"It offsets any benefit you're going to have from a bike lane when you put two general purpose lanes right next to one of the most impacted communities in the entire state," she said.

One National City project slated for SANDAG grant funding also gives Castro Reynoso pause: The city is recommended for \$500,000 to develop new transit-oriented development plans surrounding the 24th Street trolley station. Castro Reynoso said the city has not made clear how it plans to involve residents in the planning process, and that transit-oriented development can lead to gentrification and the displacement of low-income residents.

Manganiello said the city's planning process would include residents, nonprofits and businesses, and that the city's public outreach efforts are one of the main reasons it competes so well for grant funding.

"When grant opportunities such as the smart growth or the active transportation program come along, we're already teed up because we've done that outreach to present projects that demonstrate an ability to address the needs of the community," Manganiello said.

The SANDAG board of directors is scheduled to vote on approving a portion of the grant funding at its meeting next week. The rest of the funding is due for a vote by the fall.

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