

SANDAG Reform Bill Now on Governor's Desk

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By David Harris / SanDiego350

A bill to reform the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) has made its way past both houses of the State legislature and now awaits the Governor's signature. AB 805, introduced and sponsored by Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, would change the structure and voting process of the SANDAG Board of Directors. The Board consists of elected officials from 18 cities and the County.

Gonzalez-Fletcher held a press conference this past week to urge the Governor to sign her bill. The legislator was joined by San Diego Councilmember Chris Ward as well as councilmembers from Encinitas and National City. Gonzalez-Fletcher was surrounded by two dozen supporters, including members of the Quality of Life Coalition, Environmental Health Coalition, and SanDiego350.

Kicking off the "presser" in front of the downtown State building, Gonzalez-Fletcher explained her reasons for stepping into the breach. "So many of us have been frustrated for years by a system of government that has been non-responsive to so many of our communities. And it comes from a structural issue, we don't have a representative government [body]...as a result, the ten smallest cities have veto power over transportation needs and planning for the entire region."

Councilmember Ward emphasized the City of San Diego's perspective: the City has roughly half of the county population yet limited voting power. "The reforms offered by AB 805 will make SANDAG a stronger and more responsive and effective agency," Ward said, "We need critical investments in regional transit and other planning decisions. We can't get there if we don't have as much of a voice as the smaller cities...we can't get there without restoring the broken trust between the public and SANDAG."

The genesis of this community supported reform effort grew out of the deceptive campaign that SANDAG ran in support of Measure A last November (which proposed a half-cent sales tax to fund transportation projects). A series of investigative news articles published by the online news site *Voice of San Diego* uncovered that SANDAG had misled voters with faulty revenue projections and had hidden cost increases for the current TransNet projects.

These revelations brought about an external investigation into SANDAG by an independent law firm. The report issued by the law firm confirmed that the top management at SANDAG knew about the faulty projections yet failed to make any public corrections prior to the election. This ultimately led to the resignation of Executive Director Gary Gallegos. The SANDAG Board has decided to conduct a nationwide search for a new Executive Director, which is likely to take six to eight months.

However, bringing in new leadership is unlikely to solve the myriad of organizational problems at SANDAG. As a regional planning organization, SANDAG clearly lacks the checks and balances necessary to responsibly manage billions of dollars in transportation funding. Because SANDAG is incapable of reforming itself, Gonzalez Fletcher is utilizing the power of the State legislature to bring about the needed reforms. She believes AB 805 will ensure better representation, accountability, and transparency.

If signed into law, this is what AB 805 will do:

- Modify the voting process to allocate votes on a proportional basis; this will give more voting power to San Diego and less to the smaller cities
- Create an Audit Committee and the role of an independent auditor within SANDAG
- Adopt internal control guidelines to prevent and detect financial errors and fraud
- Require SANDAG's regional comprehensive plan to address greenhouse gas emission reductions and identify disadvantaged communities most affected by these emissions.
- Allow MTS and NCTD to pursue their own tax increases, subject to voter approval, for public transit purposes.

Over the past two months, community leaders have turned up the pressure on SANDAG. Environmental justice advocates, labor leaders, community organizers, and residents of low-income neighborhoods have turned out in large numbers at SANDAG Board meetings. During public testimony, speaker after speaker has criticized the Board for being unresponsive to community needs.

One of the chief concerns is that SANDAG has failed, over the past twenty years, to adequately plan for and fund the critical transportation and affordable housing needs of many lower-income communities. Environmental justice advocates are demanding that SANDAG plan and implement an equitable transportation system and reduce greenhouse gases to meet State targets. This includes expanding the transit system and supporting alternative modes of getting around, like bikeways and safe streets.

Within the next two weeks, Governor Brown will decide whether to sign (or veto) AB 805. If the Governor hears directly from ordinary San Diegans, then he is more than likely to pick up his pen and sign his name to that bill. Please take a few minutes to send your own message to the Governor. Just follow these simple instructions on how to do this:

- Click on this link: <https://govapps.gov.ca.gov/gov39mail/>
- Fill out your name and e-mail address in the appropriate boxes.

- For the “subject” box, click on the right-hand side of the box and you will see a list. Click on: “AB00805 County of San Diego: Transportation Agencies”. Then click the “continue” button.
- On the next page, next to “Position”, mark the “Pro” circle to show you are in support.
- In the comment box, copy and paste all or part of the following paragraphs. If you like, modify it with your own words. Then click “Submit”.

As a resident of San Diego County, I support AB 805 and urge you to sign this bill. SANDAG needs to be reformed now because it has broken the public’s trust. AB 805 will modify the structure of SANDAG to make it more representative of all of the population and thus more effective in responding to regional transportation needs. AB 805 contains measures to improve transparency and accountability. In addition, it will enable our local transit agencies to directly seek voter approval on ballot measures to fund the expansion of public transit, bike lanes, and safe streets. These reforms are necessary not only to restore the public trust in government but to enable progress on a sensible and equitable regional transportation system, one that reduces greenhouse gases to meet State targets and provides real transportation solutions for all San Diegans.
