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GOVERNMENT & POLITICS(/NEWS/POLITICS/)

New transportation plan gives \$3.6B to cities

Long-term scheme to pay for road improvements, new rail lines and bus routes

 (/staff/joshua-stewart/) By Joshua Stewart (/staff/joshua-stewart/) | 10:27 a.m. March 18, 2016 | Updated, 12:41 p.m.

SAN DIEGO — A regional planning organization has developed a long-term plan to pay for road improvements, new rail lines and bus routes while giving cities control of billions of dollars to spend on local transit projects of their choosing.

The new blueprint created by the San Diego Association of Governments is a blend of two previous plans. One of the old plans gave local governments around 40 percent of revenue collected from a proposed half-cent sales tax increase. The other gave nothing from the tax increase to cities, but rather let SANDAG spend the funds on regional infrastructure projects, including new trolley lines, open space, and environmental protection efforts.

SANDAG's board members balked at the two earlier plans and charged the organization's staff to come up with a new option that blends the two.

"They sent us back to the drawing table," said Gary Gallegos, SANDAG's executive director.


The hybrid plan gives cities approximately 20 percent of the \$18 billion the sales tax increase is anticipated to collect over four decades, giving municipalities a way to pay for sidewalks, water quality systems and shoreline protection.

"They have a bunch of sort of community neighborhood infrastructure needs that won't always rise to the same level that a regional infrastructure need has," Gallegos said.


The remaining sales tax revenue, combined with funds SANDAG hopes to receive from the state and federal governments, would pay for \$204 billion worth of transit, environmental protection, highway improvements and other infrastructure projects over the next four decades.

Cities would very likely be constrained in how they can spend the roughly \$3.6 billion they'll be allocated in order to make sure that funds are used for transit or environmental projects, Gallegos said.

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SANDAG's staff is honing the hybrid plan and expects to have a second draft completed by the end of the month. It will likely give cities even more funding while cutting spending on some regional transit projects, Gallegos said.

If approved by SANDAG's board, the planning organization will begin preparing the plan and sales tax increase as a ballot measure to appear in November's general election. It will require support from two-thirds of voters to pass.

The hybrid plan is already meeting political opposition. Members the San Diego Quality of Life Coalition, an alliance of labor, environmental, transportation and health organizations, said it falls short of their demands for improved water quality, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, more affordable housing and protections for stable middle-class jobs.

"The plan, the current hybrid plan, does fall short of the coalition's vision," said Monique López, a policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition, an organization in the Quality of Life Coalition.

The hybrid plan does nothing to make sure that the construction jobs created when building the transit network pay fair wages and are filled by locals, said Kyra Greene, a research and policy analyst at the Centers on Policy Initiatives, a labor-friendly organization that focuses on regional economic issues. The plan needs to have labor agreements that guarantee San Diegans get these jobs, she said.

"Without that, we forget that we are taking billions of dollars of money from San Diegans and giving it to Orange County or Arizona workers," she said.

The plan also places too much of an emphasis on highway projects and not enough focus on mass transit, López said.

"Looking at this, ECH has concerns about the freeways that are included in the hybrid approach, and the impact that the freeways would have on environmental justice for communities," she said.

Despite dissatisfaction with the hybrid plan, the Quality of Life Coalition is not turning its back to SANDAG and its efforts to get voters to approve a sales tax to fund infrastructure projects, and coalition members also said the alliance is holding together through the disagreement with the planning group. They're still united in their advocacy for cleaner transportation, mass transit, safer roads, and middle-class jobs.

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