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Advocates push SANDAG for transit-first policy

Officials say they'll give it some study

By Joshua Emerson Smith



Monique Lopez led a transit-first rally outside SANDAG headquarters last Friday.

- Photo by Joshua Emerson Smith

In an ongoing struggle over a multibillion-dollar transportation-spending plan for the region, leaders from more than a dozen social-justice organizations gathered Downtown last Friday to demand that government officials prioritize public transit over cars. Organizers, including those with the Environmental Health Coalition, San Diego Housing Federation and Cleveland National Forest Foundation, rallied on the street before packing a meeting of the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) Transportation Committee.

"What we'd like to see is for SANDAG to put transit, biking and walking projects first before anymore freeway expansion," Monique Lopez, a policy advocate with Environmental Health Coalition, told supporters. "We're saying, 'What if we moved those projects to the front? What would that look like for the region?'"

Facing mounting pressure, SANDAG officials at Friday's meeting signaled a willingness to explore activists' demands. After significant public testimony, they said they planned to complete by February a study of what it would take to make public transit projects, such as increased rail and bus routes, the first to be completed under SANDAG's long-range regional transportation plan.

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Brian Flynn's second solo exhibition at Subtext, he is the creative director and co-founder of Hybrid Design whose client list includes Nike, Apple, TED, Levi's, Starwood Hotels, Lucasfilm, Juxtapoz Magazine and more.

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"That will be somewhere in the new year when that data will come back, and we can have a discussion about: Do we agree with that? Do we disagree? And how can we weave that in?" San Diego City Council President Todd Gloria, who chairs the SANDAG Transportation Committee, said at the meeting.

In order to justify increased public transit, ridership needs to match investment to ensure affordability, Gloria added. "I don't want to create a system where the fares are so high that it's nice that it's there, but you can't even afford to ride it."

However, transit advocates, including an environmental group waging a formidable legal battle against SANDAG, were far from satisfied. In order to meet state environmental requirements, money currently allotted for freeway expansion must be reallocated toward public transit, said Jack Shu, president of the Cleveland National Forest Foundation's Board of Directors.

"The rhetoric we're hearing, we heard four years ago on that transportation plan, and we sued them on that," he said. "They're trying to buy another four years."

This isn't only about additional bus lanes, Lopez said. "No freeway expansion is acceptable. It takes away resources from the transit and walking systems, and it creates a disincentive for people to move to public transit."

While pledging to study a transit-first approach, officials haven't shown any appetite for funding rail and bus lines at the expense of freeway projects.

"The reality is that if you want more transit, you're going to have to pay for it," SANDAG Executive Director Gary Gallegos said at the meeting. "It's going to be beyond the revenue sources that you have right now."

SANDAG's roughly \$200-billion transportation-spending plan was completed in 2011 and is now being updated, a process that's required every four years. The plan allows the region to access during the next four decades more than \$100 billion in state and federal money while also pulling from local funding sources, including roughly \$26.5 billion from the half-cent sales tax known as TransNet.

Unanimously accepted by the SANDAG Transportation Committee, the updated plan calls for multiple highway expansions and upgrades, including on Interstates 5 and 15, as well as State Route 78.

"Remember, not everything's a small city where there's a lot of transportation where you can just hop on the bus," said La Mesa Vice Mayor Kristine Alessio, who represents East County on SANDAG's board. "You've got San Diego proper, and then you've got the outlying areas, La Mesa being one of them, where you have to maintain roads, as well."

In response to environmental concerns, Alessio added, "We can't just disregard the automobile. We may be driving cars that don't pollute anything in the next 20 years, and we're going to need roads for those things to drive on."

While regional transportation-spending plans are routine, SANDAG's plan is the first to be completed since California enacted SB 375, a 2008 law that requires such plans to lay out strategies for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

The Cleveland National Forest Foundation, joined by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and state Attorney General Kamala Harris, sued in 2011, arguing that SANDAG's plan not only failed to lay out a strategy for meeting state targets to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, but also that the plan would actually lead to increased emissions over time.

In December 2012, a San Diego Superior Court judge sided with the environmentalists, finding SANDAG did not include an adequate analysis past 2020 for meeting state guidelines.

"SANDAG's response has been to kick the can down the road and defer to local jurisdictions," wrote Judge Timothy Taylor. "This perverts the regional planning function of SANDAG, ignores the purse string control SANDAG has over TransNet funds, and more importantly conflicts with [government] code...."

SANDAG appealed the decision, and an appellate-court ruling is expected in roughly two months. If environmentalists prevail, SANDAG could be forced to make dramatic changes to its transportation plan.

However, that hasn't stopped local officials from moving forward with efforts to expand the region's highway system. Despite being the subject of a separate lawsuit by the Cleveland National Forest Foundation, a four-lane expansion of Interstate 5 was approved in August by the California Coastal Commission, and Caltrans is expected to start construction next year.

While the \$6.5-billion project includes rail and bicycle improvements along 27 miles of coast between La Jolla and Oceanside, the overall result will likely increase pollution and accelerate global warming, Shu said.

"Remember, greenhouse-gas emissions are cumulative," he said. "Every day we delay, the



more problems we're going to have later."

Shu and the Cleveland National Forest Foundation have demanded that SANDAG, during its next board meeting, on Friday, Sept. 12, move all TransNet dollars available for public transit away from freeway expansion. That would mean amending the plan update to reallocate about a third of the funding, or roughly \$8 billion. That would require a two-thirds majority vote by the full board.

However, Shu and others aren't waiting for the board to have a sudden change of heart.

"This plan's not much different from what was proposed in 2011, but people are mobilizing, and that's the first step toward political change," Lopez said.

In the last two months, the Environmental Health Coalition has partnered with neighborhood organizations such as City Heights Community Development Corporation to hold workshops educating residents on SANDAG's transportation plan. At the nearly dozen meetings held so far, attendance has "exceeded our expectations," Lopez said. "Forty to 50 people show up at any given meeting, which is huge for a community meeting on a weekday."

At the same time, activists have vowed to come out in force at the Sept. 12 SANDAG meeting, during which the board will vote on whether to send the updated plan into the environmental-review process. The meeting starts at 9 a.m. at 401 B St. on the seventh floor.

"I see the momentum and the change all around me in the neighborhoods," Lopez said. "Freeways can wait, but people can't."

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