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SR-94 decision: a victory for residents?

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By Dave Schwab

A policy change by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), which recently announced it might scale back the proposed freeway widening of express lanes on state Route 94 between the Interstate 805 and 5 interchanges in lieu of introducing more community-based transportation alternatives, has left Uptown neighbors guardedly optimistic.

"We welcome the announcement, but stay very skeptical of SANDAG's intentions," said Golden Hills homeowner and community spokesperson Valerie Pasquetto. Then she asked, "Is this a Trojan horse?"

SANDAG is the San Diego region's primary planning, transportation and research agency comprised of 18 cities and county governments, and is responsible for building and maintaining public transportation.



Proposed state Route 94 express lanes became a hot potato for Uptown communities such as Golden Hill and South Park. (Courtesy of Caltrans)

The SR-94 Express Lanes Project had proposed connecting I-805 South Express Lanes with Downtown San Diego by constructing two new Express Lanes along SR-94, one in each direction, and a new direct connector between SR-94 and I-805. The Express Lanes would accommodate new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service, in addition to carpools/vanpools traveling between South Bay and Downtown connecting to a wider network of Express Lanes on I-805, and at a future date on state Route 15.

A petition drive launched recently by Pasquetto and other Uptown residents has gathered several hundred signatures from local residents opposed to the freeway-widening project. [To read more about that, visit bit.ly/1JM1vS7]

Pasquetto said many Uptown residents wants SANDAG "to drop completely the notion of adding footprint to the SR-94 between the I-805 and Downtown. We believe that with the space currently available, there is bandwidth to ensure continuity for the BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) system. In the meantime, SANDAG should invest more resources in developing public transit, bike paths/lanes and pedestrian access that would encourage more people to leave their cars at home. This ultimately will make the perceived need for building new lanes for general purpose redundant."

She cautioned that while SANDAG "seems to have made a decision that responds to community needs," she added, "This is just the beginning of looking at transportation planning differently. We will keep abreast of the development to make sure these innovative ways will indeed benefit our communities. We understand that as a result of residents' strong disapproval, the region will move forward with a transit pilot project and

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the draft environmental impact review will be updated to include an analysis of alternatives.”

SANDAG said those alternatives may include:

- A transit stop in communities neighboring freeways, including Sherman Heights and Golden Hill.
- Utilizing the median and shoulder on SR-94 and I-805 for public transit during peak traffic times.
- General lane conversion for carpool and transit-only use.

“We are grateful to see SANDAG making changes to the project by proposing alternatives,” Pasquetto said. “But we will stay vigilant in ensuring that whichever project moves forward is to benefit the quality of life for the residents in the community.”

District 3 Councilmember Todd Gloria and District 8 Councilmember David Alvarez, who represent Uptown/Downtown communities, both agreed with SANDAG’s decision to reconsider SR-94’s proposed expansion, while moving to consider other transportation alternatives.

“The Express Lanes project is so important to get right because we have a community who wants and needs access to the transit system,” Alvarez said. “However, freeway projects, even those that bring transit opportunities, also bring air-quality impacts to adjacent communities. If the community bears that burden, it has to share the transit benefits.”

Alvarez praised SANDAG for responding to community concerns.

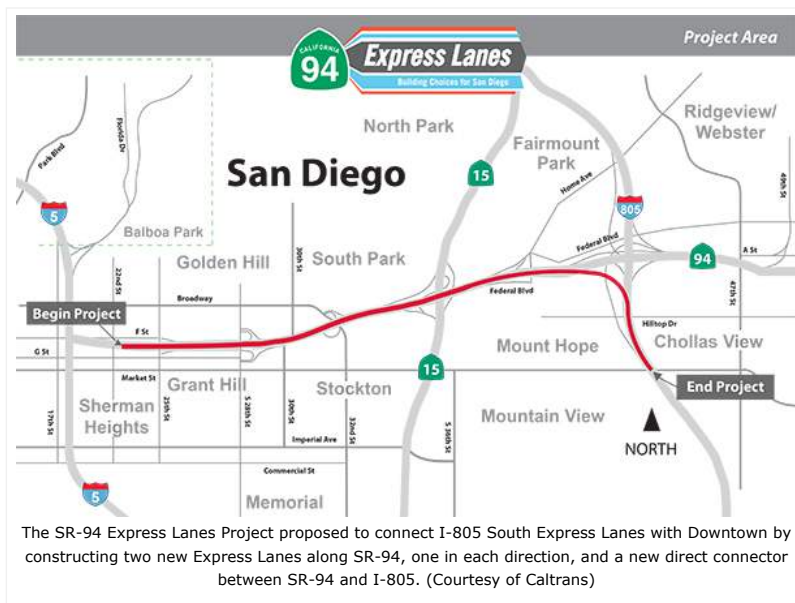
“Now the hard work begins to ensure this half-a-billion-dollar investment actually results in the best plan for all,” Alvarez said.

“Many of my fellow committee members are aware of all the work that has gone into the 94 Corridor Express Lanes project,” said Gloria, also the chair of SANDAG’s Transportation Committee who thanked SANDAG and Caltrans for “listening to the community input and finding a way to study the bus-on-shoulder demonstration project.”

“You are also aware that the community was fighting for some community-based alternatives,” Gloria continued. “Our action will allow us to move forward with a demonstration project, while more work continues on evaluation of lane conversion, a stop serving the communities of Golden Hill and Sherman Heights, and an accelerated 15 to 94 HOV-to-HOV direct connector. This is a big step forward to really look at creative solutions as we plan for long-term infrastructure projects.”

Environmentalists and other groups concurred as well with the SANDAG decision.

“We’re incredibly thankful to SANDAG, CalTrans and the many elected officials who showed leadership and support for the innovative community-supported approach,” said policy advocate Monique López of the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), a watchdog group protecting public health and the environment. “This is the beginning of looking at transportation planning differently to find innovative ways of moving that benefit all communities.”



Lopez noted that, for several months, residents in communities along SR-94 including

Golden Hill, City Heights and Sherman Heights “passionately urged SANDAG to consider options that would improve already adverse air quality and traffic. As a result, the region will move forward with a transformative transit pilot project and the draft environmental impact review will be updated to include an analysis of alternatives.”

“This is a big victory for more thoughtful transportation choices,” said Colin Parent, policy advisor for Circulate San Diego, a group advocating interconnected neighborhoods in which walking, bicycling and taking transit are viable alternatives. “A recently released report titled TransNet Today (circulatesd.nationbuilder.com/transnettoday) shows how SANDAG can use existing dollars to meet today’s transportation challenges. The decision to re-evaluate the 94 expansion shows that SANDAG can expand transit, without demolishing historic urban neighborhoods.”

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