

# Facing community pressure, officials to study alternatives to state Route 94 expansion (http://sdcitybeat.com/articles.sec-27-1-News.html)

Transit advocates claim short-term victory in regional transportation fight

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH (HTTP://SDCITYBEAT.COM/BY-AUTHOR-396-1.HTML) ✉ [joshua@sdcitybeat.com](mailto:joshua@sdcitybeat.com) (mailto:joshua@sdcitybeat.com) 🐦 [@iemers](#)



Photo by Joshua Emerson Smith

Environmental advocates for public transportation recently celebrated a significant, symbolic victory in a battle over the region's 35-year-old \$2.10 billion Regional Transportation Plan. Facing public pressure, planning officials announced last week that they would consider scaling back the proposed expansion of a major traffic corridor for downtown commuters.

This is a very special moment, said Howard Lopez, policy director with the Environmental Health Coalition in Del Mar. San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) transportation committee meeting.

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A parade of positive public testimony ensued after officials stated they would study community-based alternatives to freeway expansion along state Route 94, as well as

**Calendar**

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
13	14	15	16	17	18	19

**Queer Queens of Qomedy**  
 (http://sdcitybeat.com/events/vAT MG Space (http://sdcitybeat.com/places/y...  
 This week's show features almost half a dozen talented queer comedians including Vickie Shaw, Kaitlin Williams, Nick & Mel, and more. Proceeds from the bar will be donated to South Bay Pride and Out With It.

See all events on Sunday, Sep 13  
 (/events/date:2015-09-13)



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adding a bus stop for the adjacent residents of Golden Hill and Sherman Heights.  
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14412-FACING-COMMUNITY-PRESSURE-OFFICIALS-TO-STUDY-ALTERNATIVES-TO-STATE-ROUTE-94-EXPANSION.HTML

I don't think I've ever been happier to read a transportation committee agenda, said Randy van Vleet, organizer with the City Heights Community Development Corporation, at the meeting. This is a huge deal.

The announcement came after more than a year of community organizing, a petition with hundreds of signatures challenging the original plan and an avalanche of critical letters from public officials, including from San Diego City Council member Todd Gloria, who also chairs the agency's transportation committee.

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This is a big step forward to really look at creative solutions, Gloria told the crowd. The councilmembers District 3 includes the impacted area of Golden Hill. Representing District 8, which includes Sherman Heights, David Alvarez said he was pleased with the decision. It is critical with this half-billion-dollar investment that we ensure we put forth the best plan for all.

(HTTP://SDCITYBEAT.COM/PRINT-ARTICLE-14412-PERMANENT.HTML)

The project, part of a planned rapid-bus network running between downtown and the Otay Mesa border crossing, will add an elevated ramp for buses and carpooling connecting Route 94 to Interstate 805 to the south. As part of the roughly \$600 million undertaking, officials planned to include a new express lane in each direction along Route 94. However, advocates balked at the idea, arguing that would increase pollution and make it harder for the city and region to meet climate-change goals.

Instead, critics argued the new ramp should touch down onto existing lanes, repurposed as express lanes. In response, officials said they would study a so-called general lane conversion in an upcoming environmental impact report on the project.

However, that doesn't mean the planning agency will implement any of the community-based alternatives. Once the environmental document is complete, the transportation committee will evaluate the merits of each alternative on Route 94, and removing an existing general-purpose lane may prove unpopular.

That freeway already really congested at peak hours, Gary Gallegos, executive director of SANDAG, told CityBeat. But yeah, we are going to go study how [a general-lane conversion] would work and what impacts that would have.

At the same time, in order to safely create a new bus stop in the area, officials have said they would need to accelerate a similar project connecting Route 94 and Interstate 15 to the north by about 20 years. The feasibility of that alternative will also be studied in the environmental document, which is now expected no sooner than early next year.

Were slowing down this [project] so that ultimately the policymakers can see a more holistic picture, Gallegos said.

The campaign to curb the freeway expansion and build a new bus stop in the area has echoed growing pressure on the planning agency to put off car-centric projects and build more public transit.

Before public comment closed earlier this month on a five-year update to the

Regional Transportation Plan, environmentalists flooded SANDAG with letters blasting the agency for failing to draft a plan aimed at achieving an 80-percent reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, set by Gov. Jerry Brown in April.

Along the same lines, the state Supreme Court has taken up review of the agency's transportation plan after several lower court rulings found the document didn't properly address state-mandated standards for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

While SANDAG officials still maintain the agency's not bound by the state mandate, advocates celebrated Friday's announcement as a turning point in the ideological war over how San Diegans commute.

I think this is a very real change and a very real shift in thinking by SANDAG in response to the community input, said Joe LaCava, chair of the Community Planners Committee, which represents local community planning groups on citywide issues.

The engineering has been there, he added. It's really the policy shift that's momentous at this moment in time.

Gallegos downplayed the debate around Route 94, saying such disagreements over planning are commonplace in the region.

Not more than a year or so ago, we were having this same debate on [Interstate] 5, he said. We had that same debate on I-805. So I don't know if this is unique. The issue of are we meeting our [climate] targets, every project that we have is under that microscope.

Over recent months, SANDAG officials have repeatedly argued proposed community-based alternatives on Route 94 were all but impossible because the funding largely came from Transnet—a half-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2004, which calls for the addition of high-occupancy vehicle lanes along Route 94.

Planning officials have now said they will not only study the new alternatives, but they will launch a more than \$30 million pilot project to allow rapid-bus service along certain freeway shoulders. The idea was initially looked at by SANDAG as an alternative to freeway expansion. But it wasn't brought to the public's attention until the Environmental Health Coalition obtained an internal study of the project earlier this year.

SANDAG has broad flexibility to implement Transnet in a way that is more friendly to transit than they have been willing to admit, said Colin Parent, policy counsel for the transportation think tank Circulate San Diego, which released a study on the issue last week called Transnet Today.

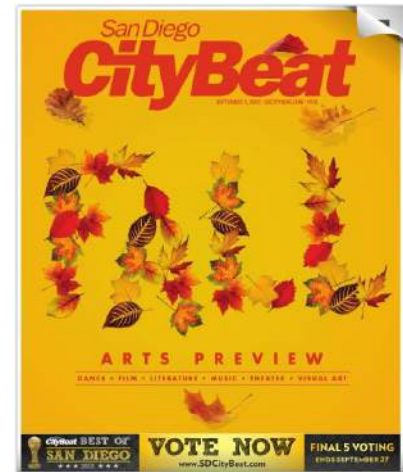
With new emerging funding sources, the study argues, the sales tax can be modified by a two-thirds vote of the SANDAG board to adequately meet the region's transit needs. A review of the ordinance is mandated every 10 years, with the next review scheduled for 2019.

Many of us have been advocating for SANDAG to put a greater priority on transit, Parent said. And that doesn't necessarily have to mean never building another freeway, but it certainly means using the funding flexibility that they have to make those transit investments as early as possible.

However, getting a two-thirds majority of the 10-member SANDAG board to review



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However, getting a two-thirds majority of the 19-member SANDAG board to revise Transnet may be politically infeasible. Many of the elected officials that sit on the board represent suburban areas that favor sprawl and auto-centric planning.

In many cases there's not as much flexibility as they perceive, Gallegos said. However, at the same time, he also hesitated to use the sales tax as an excuse for limiting options on the Route 94 project: I don't want to equate it to this can't happen because of Transnet.

Public transportation and environmental advocates have targeted a freeway expansion project surrounded by dense urban neighborhoods represented by some of the region's most progressive leaders. Forcing officials to adopt a transit-first approach would look like a victory for many. However, if the campaign doesn't succeed, it's unclear where else in the region such a fight could.

*Write to [joshuas@sdcitybeat.com](mailto:joshuas@sdcitybeat.com) (<mailto:joshuas@sdcitybeat.com>).*