

LEADING THE WAY

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Policies and
Practices for
Sustainable
Communities
Strategies

October 2016



ClimatePlan

PLANNING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

California is leading the nation in fighting climate change to achieve a more secure and sustainable future. To meet the state's ambitious climate goals, we must reduce greenhouse gas pollution from transportation, and that requires us to rethink where we build and how we get around. But innovative approaches to land use and transportation can provide benefits beyond fighting climate change, making our communities better for all.

The goal of achieving many benefits simultaneously was a fundamental part of the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375). This law requires California's most populous regions to attempt to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. To show how these goals will be met, each region's Metropolitan Planning

Organization prepares a Sustainable Communities Strategy as part of its Regional Transportation Plan. The process of creating these plans has laid the foundation for healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable communities. Local and regional leaders around the state are planning for safer streets and healthier neighborhoods, with more access for everyone to good jobs, affordable homes, and reliable transportation.

But continued innovation is needed as challenges continue to emerge. Communities across California are grappling with costly housing and displacement, and are still learning how to become resilient in this era of drought and climate change. Regions can use their Sustainable Communities Strategies to meet these challenges—and more.



LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

All eighteen Metropolitan Planning Organization regions have now adopted Sustainable Communities Strategies, making this an excellent time to evaluate what's working best, and where innovation is still needed. To that end, ClimatePlan and its partners have set out to identify innovative policies and practices that can make our communities more healthy, equitable, and sustainable. In this report, we highlight:

- **Leading practices** that have emerged so far in adopted Sustainable Communities Strategies, based on extensive input from ClimatePlan partners, transportation planners, and others.
- Recommendations **to go further** in challenging areas such as climate adaptation, water, and affordable housing.

This report presents a selection of “leading practices,” prioritizing those that accomplish the most and are not yet uniformly adopted. These practices were

gathered through expert interviews and from staff at Metropolitan Planning Organizations, from advocates, and from academics, both in individual interviews and larger meetings. They are also informed by reviews of related reports and selected Sustainable Communities Strategies.

The full report includes each practice, why it is important, and examples showing how regional agencies have employed it successfully. The examples highlighted are not a comprehensive round-up of all of the progress in the state, nor were they selected via an objective review of every region's plan. Instead, they were chosen to illustrate effective practices adopted by regions large and small. While one size does not fit all, many of these practices are adaptable and can be tailored to a region's individual circumstances and unique context.

Our goal here is to open a conversation about what's working best—what's leading the way—and how California's regions can do even better.



A. GETTING STARTED: PREPARING FOR AN INCLUSIVE PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Give the entire community a voice in creating the Sustainable Communities Strategy. Seek public input from the beginning, with committees and in planning public workshops. Reach out specifically to under-served communities and vulnerable groups, offering help to meet needs like childcare, translation, and transportation. For best results, offer micro-grants to local organizations for skilled outreach.

Adopt a focused list of performance targets. Create a focused list of impacts that people can understand, in areas that matter to the community, such as public health, social equity, and conservation. Set clear targets (not just measures) so that people can compare how well each scenario meets the goals. Be sure to comprehensively evaluate impacts on people's health, on equity, and on important landscapes.

B. AIMING HIGH: PLANNING FOR HEALTHY, EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Use the scenario creation process to host a discussion about where and how the region should grow. Work with the public and with local agencies to identify where growth should and should not occur. Then, based on community input, create several scenarios that are truly distinct. In each one, identify the transportation investments to support that pattern of growth, rather than using the same list of transportation projects for all. Throughout the process, help people understand the data and assumptions used.

Support conservation of natural and working lands through land use scenarios and transportation investments. When outlining where the region will grow, factor in comprehensive natural resource assessments. Choose land use forecasts that conserve resource areas and farmland. Then invest in both conservation and existing communities, funding conservation planning and land protection, while focusing growth and investments in existing communities, especially under-served communities.

Develop scenarios that minimize displacement and provide homes for all income levels in all communities. Displacement is threatening more and more low-income families; design scenarios that anticipate and reduce this risk. Balance jobs and housing to increase the supply of affordable homes,

LEADING P

especially in expensive areas, and to give people more access to jobs without long commutes. **To go further**, design scenarios that 1) systematically prioritize the needs of under-served communities, 2) expand local transit service, 3) create and preserve affordable housing opportunities in transit-rich and high-opportunity communities, 4) directly protect low-income residents from displacement, 5) focus on creating living-wage and middle-wage jobs for local residents, and 6) improve health and safety in under-served communities.

Help rural communities improve mobility, health, and quality of life while reducing dependence on driving. Plan for new homes, jobs, and services within existing rural communities to help residents meet critical needs without having to drive long distances. Develop and fund practical transportation options, such as vanpools, to serve rural residents. **To go further**, create scenarios that direct rural growth into existing rural communities, and develop a comprehensive rural first-mile / last-mile strategy, including ride-sourcing such as Uber and Lyft and “micro-transit” solutions.

Build climate resilience into land use forecasts and transportation investments. First, identify likely climate impacts—such as drought, wildfires, and

flooding in vulnerable areas. Then, set goals to make the region more resilient, and use tools like project selection criteria to get these goals met. Wherever possible, encourage the use of natural infrastructure, rather than additional built infrastructure—for example, preserve watersheds instead of building water-treatment plants. As part of this planning, consider economic impacts and prioritize the needs of vulnerable communities.

Support sustainable water management with land use forecasts and transportation investments. It is increasingly apparent that water limits where and how California’s communities can grow. Maintain an ongoing dialogue between water experts and transportation planners. Align growth projections with accurate projections of water needs and supply. Prioritize water access for existing low-income rural communities to recognize and address their past exclusion from water supply and wastewater infrastructure. Overall, avoid forecasting new development or funding new transportation projects in places that would reduce groundwater recharge, or areas that lack reliable long-term access to water.

PRACTICES

C. MOVING FORWARD: CHOOSING TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENTS

Select the best transportation projects based on clear goals, using a transparent process. Select the best transportation projects using a rational and open scoring process linked to overall goals and performance targets. Consider every project on its merits; few, if any, should be automatically “grandfathered” onto the list. Then track the results, providing transparent, real-time information about project impacts, costs, and phasing—for example, letting the public know when a new bus service expansion will be ready to ride.

Shift funds away from road expansion, toward investments that help meet regional health, equity, and sustainability goals. When creating a transportation budget, move away from highway construction and prioritize public transit—especially hard-to-fund transit operations—as well as infrastructure for safe walking and biking. Use flexible funds not just for transportation alternatives, but for other investments in making sustainable, healthy, and equitable regions: planning grants for local agencies, free transit passes for youth, active transportation education, conservation of resource areas and farmland, shared-use mobility, affordable housing options, and more. New sales tax measures may provide particularly useful opportunities. **To go further**, look for flexibility in existing sales tax measures as well.

Invest to meet the needs of under-served communities and vulnerable populations. Begin with a clear and open process to identify the critical transportation needs of the region as a whole, with a focus on under-served communities. Work with environmental justice advisory groups to engage

community members and other experts. Hire community-based organizations, and offer planning grants and technical assistance, to help under-served communities submit projects. Create incentive programs and put regional transportation funding, especially early investments, toward meeting prioritized needs, including the needs of third-shift workers, rural residents, and other vulnerable populations. **To go further**, devote a specific percentage of discretionary revenue in the first four years to projects in under-served communities selected through a community-run process supported by planning grants.

Support walking and biking by prioritizing active transportation in plans and investments. Walking and biking are the most healthy and sustainable forms of transportation, and are fundamental to the whole system. To support them, develop active transportation plans—including first- and last-mile strategies to help people get to bus stops or train stations from home or work—and incorporate these into Regional Transportation Plans. Prioritize, maximize, and front-load funding for active transportation.

D. CHECKING IN: EVALUATING GROWTH PLANS AND MITIGATING IMPACTS

Develop transportation models that fully convey the many benefits of walkable communities and better travel choices. Use models that clearly convey how different transportation investments and land use patterns result in different outcomes, and compare these to the performance targets—including those around health, equity, and sustainability—chosen with public input. Make these models publicly available. **To go further**, factor in the benefits of funding travel alternatives such as active transportation and shared-use mobility.

Maximize greenhouse gas reductions through changes in land use and transportation.

SB 375 requires regions to reduce emissions of the pollutants that are destabilizing our climate through land use and transportation changes. To do so, analyze projects, programs, and scenarios to see which are most effective at reducing emissions while supporting healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities. Incorporate new strategies such as bike sharing, ride-sourcing, and electric vehicle incentives. Publicly show how the greenhouse gas reductions will be achieved, highlighting the portions from land use and transportation. Once the Sustainable Communities Strategy has been adopted, track estimated emissions to determine whether greenhouse gas reduction goals are being met.

Use equity analyses to evaluate and address the impacts of land use scenarios on disadvantaged communities. Working with equity advocates, develop regionally nuanced criteria to identify disadvantaged communities. Create metrics based on community priorities, and compare scenarios by how much they improve these metrics. As part of implementing the plan, identify specific actions to mitigate negative impacts and address disparities. Annually measure and share progress on addressing community needs.

Provide comprehensive regional mitigation for natural and working lands impacted by transportation projects. When transportation projects—such as a new train line or road expansion—result in the loss of wildlife habitat or agricultural land, agencies can mitigate those losses by paying for permanent protection of similar land. To do this effectively, start with a comprehensive assessment of the region’s natural and working lands, informed by leading conservation organizations, and use the results to set priorities for mitigation. As a condition of funding, require that projects avoid or minimize impacts to these lands,

and mitigate any unavoidable impacts. Acquire and restore mitigation lands in advance following regional priorities, with all easements held by accredited land trusts. **To go further**, reduce the need for mitigation by providing incentives for cities and counties to direct new development into existing communities.

E. GETTING IT DONE: IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES STRATEGIES

Reduce the risk of displacement using funding and other incentives. Directly fund the creation of affordable homes near public transit. Track jurisdictions’ compliance with regional housing needs allocations and provide incentives for meeting affordable housing requirements. Also provide incentives for adopting strong tenant protections and policies that support building more affordable homes, such as increasing height and density limits, zoning for multifamily homes, and allowing for reduced and shared parking. **To go further**, make some regional transportation funding available only to local governments that have anti-displacement policies and meet regional standards for affordable housing planning and construction.

Support local implementation of the region’s Sustainable Communities Strategy. Fund implementation through competitive grants, and condition other funding on recipients’ acting to meet regional goals. Collaborate directly with jurisdictions and agencies using tools like memoranda of understanding and infrastructure financing districts. Offer technical assistance, especially to under-served or rural communities. Support state funding for local projects that meet regional goals, and offer technical assistance in applying. Offer streamlined environmental review to developments that support regional goals, making it clear in the Sustainable Communities Strategy which types of projects are eligible and how to apply.



CONCLUSION

IN THE LEAD, BUT NOT ACROSS THE FINISH LINE

This report includes examples of leadership from regional agencies across the state. Elected leaders and public agency staff are taking action to plan for a better future—one that is healthier, more just and equitable, and more sustainable—for communities across California. These practices are heartening, and regions can share them with one another, learn from them, and build upon them.

Gaps remain, however, and we are beginning to learn how to close them. Leaders throughout the state can use some of the recommendations here to address the

challenges of climate change, drought, and the affordable housing crisis. But continued innovation and education are needed, as is political will. In addition, regions need support from state agencies, including funding and alignment of state policies with the goals of SB 375.

Changing how California plans for land use and transportation is a tall order. It requires the state, regions, cities, counties, and many others to work together in new ways. But this change is starting to happen, and it's making our communities better, and our future brighter.

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