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## Sandag Needs to Be a Trailblazer for Public Transit

By Jana Clark

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The San Diego Association of Governments is in the process of updating its plan for how our region will grow in the coming decades. San Diego Forward: The Regional Plan frames growth patterns for housing, jobs and transportation through 2050. Unfortunately, this update of Sandag's Regional Plan includes the same fatal errors that marred the 2011 version of the plan. All San Diegans — and particularly the business sector — should demand better of our elected leaders.

While giving plenty of lip service to the dangers of climate change, Sandag's plan unconscionably delays crucial investment in a robust transportation network that would get San Diegans out of their cars and onto public transit. This failure of vision, and of leadership, means that the majority of us will remain locked into car-centered transportation for the next 35 years.

### The LA Example

Los Angeles' approach to transportation is a marked contrast to San Diego's. The LA Metro rail system is expanding rapidly, and Angelenos are increasingly leaving their cars for daily commutes as well as to attend social and cultural activities. Before long, LA residents will be able to ride the Metro from downtown LA all the way to the beach. After decades of slow expansion of the Metro, recent improvements have happened over the course of a few short years. The expanded Metro system makes it possible for all residents to take advantage of the region's many opportunities. It also reduces congestion, which improves economic vitality, helps keep the air cleaner and limits LA's contributions to climate change.

San Diego should take a similar approach. The Cleveland National Forest Foundation has put forward a realistic plan that would significantly improve mobility while dramatically reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The 50-10 Transit Plan speeds up investments in transit in reaction to the growing threat of climate change.

### Calling All Cars

A growing number of studies indicate that extending and expanding freeways ultimately invites more cars onto the road. Instead of relieving congestion, widening freeways worsens existing traffic problems. But Sandag nevertheless seems determined to widen freeways before investing in transit. This is the wrong approach for a region that is projected to grow by 31 percent in coming decades and hopes to encourage more compact development.

Sandag itself acknowledged that its approach to land use planning has promoted sprawl for far too long. The Regional Plan calls for residential growth focused in already-developed areas. But for this plan to work, SANDAG needs to put its money where its mouth is. If the agency is going to encourage compact growth for both commercial and residential development, it must supply sufficient transportation options in the short term to match those development patterns. Otherwise, Sandag's plan will create 25 years of gridlock before meaningful relief appears in the form of a robust public transit system.

Sandag's biggest obstacle toward a more sustainable future appears to be a lack of imagination. The agency and its staff suffer from "assumption drag," a concept introduced by Rand Corp. in work for the National Cooperative Highway Research Program. Rand defines assumption drag as "the tendency to maintain assumptions based on past trends, even after they have lost their validity." In this case, Sandag's land use plans have caught up with current trends toward walkability and shorter commute times. Unfortunately, its approach to transportation planning still drags behind and will not adequately support these new development patterns.

The San Diego region is at a crossroads when it comes to livability, commercial vitality and protection of our natural areas, air and water. As Sandag updates its regional plan this year, it should take this opportunity to rethink the region's approach to transportation planning. Instead of waiting until 2050

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to complete our transit network, let's aim for 2025. That's a goal — and a future — that all San Diegans can embrace.

*Jana Clark is a member of the board of the Cleveland National Forest Foundation.*



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