

Case Study — San Diego Regional Comprehensive Plan

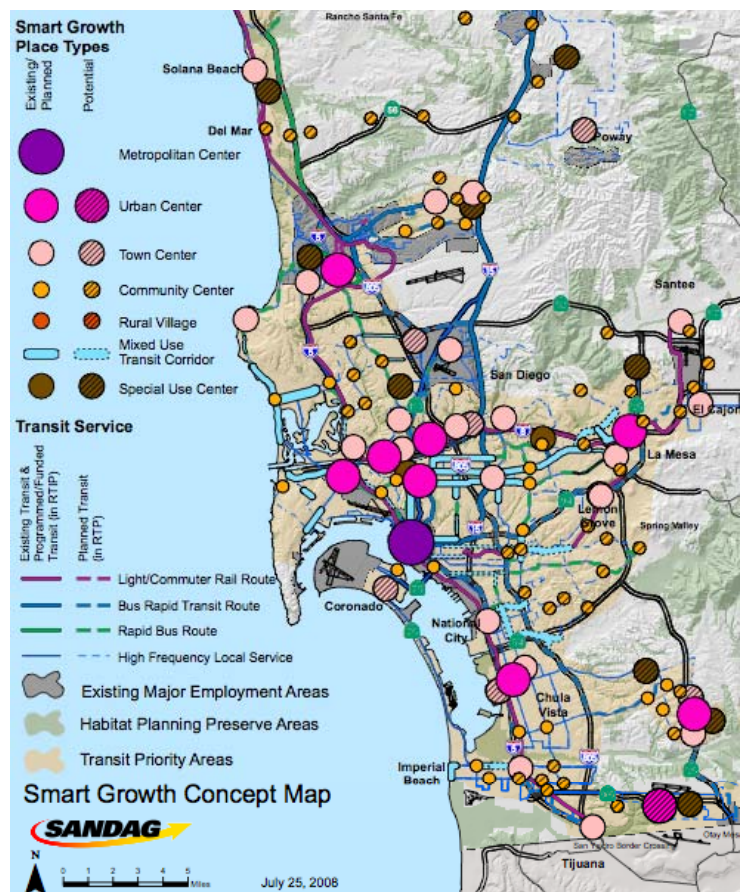
In Brief

- Location:** San Diego County, California
- Policy type:** Transportation System Efficiency, Land Use, Climate Change Policy, Financial Incentives for Energy Efficiency
- Sector:** All Sectors
- Start Date:** 2004
- Summary:** All local governments in the San Diego region worked together to identify priority growth areas close to existing development and transportation infrastructure. These areas were then made eligible for planning and infrastructure grants intended to encourage location-efficient growth to reduce infrastructure, energy, and environmental costs.
- Impact:** The program has helped contribute to increased transit ridership in the region and the development of a larger percentage of housing units in smart growth areas. Extension and effective implementation of the plan is expected to reduce energy use and reduce per capita carbon dioxide emissions from passenger vehicles by 13% from 2005 levels in 2020 and 18% by 2035.

Overview

The San Diego Regional Comprehensive Plan was developed in 2004 to provide a blueprint for managing the region's growth while preserving natural resources and limiting urban sprawl. The Plan is based on the concept that thoughtful land use planning and targeted transportation investments can shape private development to achieve smart growth principles. The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) worked with San Diego area cities and county government to collectively identify urban centers and transit corridors to prioritize for growth. These areas are eligible for grants from SANDAG for planning and infrastructure projects.

The Regional Comprehensive Plan is now also being used as the basis for compliance with the state's recently passed SB 375, a law that requires each metropolitan area to develop a Sustainable Community Strategy to meet a greenhouse gas emission reduction target through land use, transportation, and housing planning. SANDAG will be creating the Sustainable Community Strategy as it updates the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for 2050.



A section of the 2008 SANDAG [Smart Growth Concept Map](#) used for determining eligibility for Smart Growth Incentive Program planning or infrastructure development grants.

Management and Funding

SANDAG is the Metropolitan Planning Organization and transportation planning agency that represents the eighteen cities and the county government in the San Diego region. SANDAG builds consensus; makes strategic plans; obtains and allocates resources; plans, engineers, and builds public transportation; and provides information on a broad range of topics pertinent to the region's quality of life. While SANDAG does not have regulatory authority over any local governments, its plans and incentives are used by local governments to guide local planning and investment decisions.

The Regional Comprehensive Plan's success is largely due to the active role that the local governments played in its development. SANDAG began by working with the governments to create a consensus definition of *smart growth*. The association then led the development of a smart growth concept map that officially designates areas that are able to accommodate higher residential or employment density, pedestrian-friendly, and connected to other centers by transit. Areas can be designated into seven categories based on size and use: Metropolitan Centers, Urban Centers, Town Centers, Community Centers, Rural Villages, Mixed Use Transit Corridors, and Special Use Centers.

Cities were asked to identify "Existing/Planned" areas that either currently meet smart growth principles or are officially slated to be in local master plans. Cities could also identify "Potential" areas that hold promise as smart growth centers but are either not currently zoned or planned as such, or lack transportation connections. SANDAG used regional growth data to confirm that each nominated area met specific thresholds for density potential before officially designating the area on the Smart Growth Concept Map. As a result, the final map represents the priorities of local governments as well as the areas with the greatest potential based on geographic, infrastructure, and growth capacity criterion.

In 2004, the same year that the Regional Comprehensive Plan was adopted, county residents approved a 40-year extension of a half-cent sales tax to support smart growth and environmental mitigation projects in the region. This TransNet fund generated \$3.3 billion between 1998 and 2008, and the extension is expected to generate more than \$14 billion for highway, transit, and local road projects. A total four percent of the funds (two percent for each) are set aside for an Environmental Mitigation Program and a Smart Growth Incentive Program.

The TransNet fund generates approximately \$4–6 million each year for the Smart Growth Incentive Program and is disbursed through a grant process every two years. Local governments can apply for up to \$2 million for planning efforts or infrastructure projects. Only designated Existing/Planned smart growth areas qualify for infrastructure grants, while both Existing/Planned and Potential areas qualify for planning grants. Because local governments often leverage matching funds, the grant program is able to fund as many as 20 projects in each cycle. The grants are highly competitive as they can be used for a wider range of projects and have less strenuous reporting requirements than many state and federal funding programs.

Performance

According to the [RCP Monitoring Report](#), early metrics of the results of the Regional Comprehensive Plan include:

- The percent of new housing units built in Smart Growth Opportunity Areas has increased fitfully, improving from 37% in 2004–05 to 44% in 2008–09.
- From 2005 to 2008, Smart Growth Opportunity Areas experienced a net gain of over 11,000 jobs while non-Smart Growth Areas experienced a net loss of over 9,000 jobs.
- Regional transit ridership increased steadily from around 89 million boardings in 2004 to around 104 million in 2009.
- Travel volumes decreased slightly in most major highway corridors, and commuting travel time decreased on nearly every major roadway between 2005 and 2009.

- The percent of solid waste that was recycled was close to achieving the state-mandated target.
- Recycled water use continued to increase substantially.

TransNet funds have supported an additional 227 lane miles of highway; provided financing for more than 800 local road projects; and expanded regional transit with 85 miles of trolley and commuter rail lines. The funds have also been used to provide discounted transit passes for disabled people, seniors, and students. Selected TransNet Projects include:

- San Diego Trolley extended to Santee, Old Town, and through Mission Valley to San Diego State University and La Mesa;
- COASTER Commuter Rail opened between Oceanside and San Diego; and
- Sprinter light rail opened connecting Oceanside and Escondido.

The Smart Growth Incentive Program has provided around \$32 million to 24 capital and 6 planning projects in its [2005 pilot](#) and its [2009-10 funding cycle](#). The next funding round is expected in 2011. Projects funded include:

- Park Boulevard at Harbor Drive Pedestrian Bridge, Centre City Development Corporation
- Grossmont Trolley Station Pedestrian Enhancements, City of La Mesa and Metropolitan Transit System
- Mid-City Urban Trail & SR-15 Bikeway, City of San Diego
- Maple Street Pedestrian Plaza, City of Escondido
- 8th Street Corridor Smart Growth Revitalization, National City
- Third Avenue Streetscape Implementation Project, City of Chula Vista
- Mid-City SR 15 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Station Area Planning Study, City of San Diego



Rendering of Grossmont Trolley Station Pedestrian Enhancements, funded through the Smart Growth Incentive Program. [Source.](#)



Streetscape improvements resulting from the Bird Rock Traffic Management Plan funded by the Smart Growth Incentive Program. [Source.](#)

The RCP Monitoring Report does not include information on reductions of greenhouse gas emissions or energy use by geographic area or by grant allocation area from the TransNet Smart Growth Incentive Program. However, SANDAG is preparing a 2050 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) built in part off of the RCP, and is evaluating greenhouse gas reductions by transportation scenario for that project. As of December 2010, the [draft 2050 Regional Transportation Plan](#) [see pages 78–79] projects that development in accordance with the Preferred Scenario would reduce per capita carbon dioxide emissions from passenger vehicles by 13%

from 2005 levels in 2020 and 18% by 2035, exceeding the SB 375 targets for the region of 7% and 13% respectively. Fuel consumption per day per capita is projected to decrease from 1.45 gallons in 2008 to 0.89 gallons in 2050.

Lessons Learned

SANDAG has approached the Plan's implementation through incentives and collaboration, because it does not have land use authority and is not a regulatory agency. As a result, successful implementation has required collaboration between SANDAG and local government agencies, as well as monetary incentives (like the Smart Growth Incentive Program and Environmental Mitigation Program) and providing resources (like Smart Growth Design Guidelines, Smart Growth Photo Library and Visual Simulations, Smart Growth Trip Generation, and Smart Growth Parking Strategies). It has not been a "top-down" effort, but rather a "bottom-up" effort with a focus on collaboration and incentives.



Signage and bicycle facility improvements resulting from Mid-City Urban Trail & SR-15 Bikeway Project funded by the Smart Growth Incentive Program. [Source.](#)

There has been much change since 2004 when the RCP was adopted, including a new focus on climate change (and passage of SB 375 in California), a growing emphasis on public health as an important part of the land use/transportation planning field, a greater emphasis on transit planning as part of the transportation network, stronger relationships with tribal nations in the region, and economic cycles that have slowed, but not stopped, development. SANDAG aims to consider these changes in future planning including the 2050 Regional Transportation Plan.

Additionally, SANDAG planners have noticed a considerable increase in receptivity to smart growth and sustainable development principles, with many jurisdictions moving toward higher densities and more mixed uses through general plan and community plan updates of their own accord. The 2050 Regional Growth Forecast shows that most of the new growth to 2050 will take place in the most urbanized areas of the region, with a greater share of multi-family housing growth near transit than ever before.

However, funding remains a concern. For every round of grants that SANDAG issues, many worthy applications cannot be funded. In addition, transit operation funding has been cut from the state budget on numerous occasions. As transit services continue to be cut, it is challenging to talk about smart growth—especially the connection between higher densities and increased transportation choices—when local communities are feeling the cuts and worried about decreased choices and potential increases in traffic.

Related Resources

Regional Comprehensive Plan (2004):

<http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?projectid=1&fuseaction=projects.detail>

Information on the TransNet program:

<http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?classid=30&fuseaction=home.classhome>

Regional Energy Strategy (December 2009):

<http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?projectid=332&fuseaction=projects.detail>

Climate Action Strategy (March 2010):

<http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?projectid=337&fuseaction=projects.detail>

Information on the development of the 2050 Regional Transportation Plan:

<http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?projectid=349&fuseaction=projects.detail>

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