

San Diego's high-speed rail plan hinges on urban density as population growth wanes



San Diego Association of Governments Executive Director Hasan Ikhata rides the trolley to the Metropolitan Transit System's downtown office in August 2020.
(Sam Hodgson / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By [JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH](#)

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Two hundred miles of high-speed rail carrying electric trains moving twice as fast as the region's trolley system. A dozen new stations, including massive hubs near the downtown airport and the Tijuana border.

That's the backbone of a recently released [\\$160-billion blueprint](#) aimed at making public transit as fast as driving a car — which elected officials from across the San Diego region are [preparing to discuss](#) Friday.

Experts largely agree the plan's long-term success would hinge on whether cities can usher in dense urban development around transit stations, at a time when birth rates in San Diego and throughout California are declining as overall population growth has all but come to a halt.

“If new residents can live in apartments near rail, with easy walking, biking and transit access, that will be the key determinant as to whether or not this plan becomes a success,” said Ethan Elkind, director of the climate program at UC Berkeley’s Center for Law, Energy and the Environment.

“Population growth is a bit less important than where that growth occurs,” added Elkind, the co-author of a [2015 study](#) that found San Diego rail stations were among the least walkable in California.

Some conservatives disagree. They say San Diego doesn’t have much of a chance of building the type of urban communities that would justify tens of billions of dollars in transit projects.

“It makes no sense at all to build a regular trolley let alone high-speed rail,” said Richard Rider, chairman of San Diego Tax Fighters. “They’d have to make some assumption about growth which is off the charts compared to what is really happening.”

Republican officials also say the transportation plan short-changes previously promised freeway expansions.

Most recently, San Marcos Mayor Rebecca Jones [attacked](#) the proposal for its inclusion of revenue from a “road charge.” The state has for several years studied a per-mile fee that some expect to replace the gas tax’s dwindling coffers, as more electric vehicles come online.

SANDAG vision for high-speed rail

The proposed transit system would be completed over the next three decades and include 200 miles of elevated or tunneled rail lines, as well as a dozen new train stations.



Source: San Diego Association of Governments

MICHELLE GILCHRIST U-T

Still, supporters of the transit vision firmly control the 21-member board of the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG, the region's long-range transportation planning agency whose staff authored the plan. An alliance between environmental groups and organized labor has also thrown its weight behind the idea, exploring the possibility of a citizen's ballot initiative to fund new transit projects.

That doesn't mean, however, that elected officials will follow through with pushing density on their home turf.

For years, neighborhood opposition has stalled new apartment construction from the coast of San Diego to tony Northern California hamlets. The state Legislature as well as local leaders have paid considerable lip service to lifting high limits and parking restrictions in and around affluent suburbs with little to show for it over the last decade.

San Diego could get its first challenge right out of the gate. The initial leg of the high-speed rail plan is tentatively slated to run along the coast through Solana Beach and

Encinitas, cities that have bitterly fought housing requirements in court.

SANDAG's top brass says they have designed a system that will attract robust ridership as long as local leaders loosen zoning restrictions and champion new multifamily housing around train stations.

"Frankly, people have to rise up as leaders here," said SANDAG Executive Director Hasan Ikhata. "If every city's going to sit in the corner and say, 'I want to preserve my rich, privileged area,' this region will lose altogether."

The plan's broader goals are to manage freeway congestion and rein in greenhouse gases. It's projected to increase transit use among commuters from 3 percent before the pandemic to 13 percent by 2050. At the same time, the number of people driving alone to work would drop from about 80 percent to around 62 percent.

Of course, it's hard to predict exactly what San Diego will look like in 30 years.

Until recently, SANDAG had [projected](#) the region would be home to more than 4 million people by mid-century, with an average annual growth rate around 1 percent based on births, deaths and migration.

However, San Diegans are having fewer and fewer children for a number of reasons, including stagnant wages and crippling housing costs. The region's annual growth rate is now [projected](#) to plummet to 0.3 percent by 2040, with deaths outpacing births for the first time, according to SANDAG.

By 2050, the region is expected to be home to about 3.7 million people, up from more than 3.3 million today — adding roughly 244,000 new housing units to its current stock of roughly 1.2 million units.

Those figures aren't necessarily welcome news for a region poised to spend billions on a rail system predicated on transforming large swaths of suburbia into bustling urban landscapes.

Proponents say not to worry: The need for density will be eased, to a certain extent, by the new commuter rail's high speeds.



San Diego Metropolitan Transit System trolley cars pull into the 12th and Imperial station in Downtown San Diego. (Sam Hodgson / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Historically, cities with the most robust transit ridership in the United States, such as Chicago, San Francisco and New York City, have large centralized, job centers plagued by gridlocked traffic.

San Diego's rail system, on the other hand, would service a region with dispersed employment hubs, often featuring office parks with plentiful parking. That's why agency planners have spent the last year analyzing commuter routes, drive times and countless other factors to develop a system fast enough to keep pace with auto travel.

"San Diego's plan as proposed is taking a leap different from every other region in the United States," said Yonah Freemark, senior research associate and transit expert at the Washington D.C.-based think tank Urban Institute.

"This is more in the model of European regional rail systems that have been built for long distances at high speeds," he added. "We see that in many German cities and in the Paris region."

SANDAG officials said the envisioned commuter rail could travel up to 120 miles per hour in spots, and will average around 50 miles per hour. The system would use a mix of subway and elevated tracks to avoid road traffic.

By comparison, the Bay Area Rapid Transit rail system that services San Francisco, Oakland and other cities can move [up to 70 miles per hour](#), averaging about 35 miles an hour. San Diego's current trolley system has a top speed of 55 miles an hour and an average speed of 21 miles an hour.

Officials said the new commuter rail system would run about 22 hours a day, with service every seven to 10 minutes.

The locations of new train stations have yet to be hashed out, and the process could be contentious. Recently, SANDAG officials agreed to relocate a proposed site in North Park to City Heights after social justice activists complained.

The agency envisions these new transit stations as hives of activity, with passengers hopping in and out of on-demand shuttles, transferring between buses and trains, shopping and going out to eat.

“Mobility will be a service for a significant portion of the population in the future,” said Ray Major, SANDAG's chief economist. “The cost of vehicle ownership doesn't make sense for a lot of people.”



Rodey Jerome waits for the trolley with his bike at the Santee Town Center Wednesday, May 26, 2021 in Santee, Calif. (Denis Poroy / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Such a service would be welcome news for Rodey Jerome, 56, of City Heights. Like most transit riders in San Diego, he's doesn't have access to a car. (Seventy percent of transit riders in San Diego are low-income residents without regular access to a vehicle, according to the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System.)

His daily commute takes about 90 minutes each way and includes catching a bus around 6 a.m. to the Green Line trolley out to Santee, where he rides his bike to his job providing in-home supportive services to an elderly woman.

"It's very much an inconvenience, the amount of time I spend on travel," he said. "I'm currently working on getting a car, but it's a major expense."

Advocates for low-income communities say they will support SANDAG's new transportation plan, but only if the final version prioritizes immediate upgrades to the region's bus and trolley systems.

"The plan is very visionary and we're super excited about it, but it's not providing a sense of urgency," said Carolina Martinez, climate justice campaign director for the Environmental Health Coalition. "Our communities are suffering right now."

The phasing of various projects is still being determined, as is the financing. A tax initiative that spells out both could be put to voters as early as 2022.

SANDAG officials have urged patience with their long-term vision. They've pointed out that regions often take decades, if not generations, to grow into ambitious rail projects.

Ikhata said that the plan for Bay Area Rapid Transit was initially criticized before it opened for service in the 1970s.

"Newspapers wrote that San Francisco's wasting money," he said. "Imagine San Francisco without the BART today. There's no way."