

Residents, officials make U-turn on State Route 94 expansion (<http://sdcitybeat.com/articles.sec-27-1-News.html>)

City Councilmembers pen letters to SANDAG, Caltrans

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Chelsea Klaseus and Monique Lopez stand on the 25th Street bridge over proposed site of State Route 94 expansion
Photo by Joshua Emerson Smith

Sherman Heights resident Chelsea Klaseus reluctantly commutes by car to her job in Kearny Mesa. So when regional transportation officials announced plans to expand State Route 94 to accommodate a rapid-bus service, she wanted to find out more.

I would absolutely love to be able to take transit to work, said the 31-year-old city employee. But [right now] it would take probably two hours.

After attending several public meetings, Klaseus learned planners had no intention of including a bus stop in her neighborhood or in nearby Golden Hill. Instead, the meetings, she said, focused on roughly \$12 million available for other improvements, such as bike lanes and green space.

Before [recently] when people would talk about [Route] 94 in the neighborhood

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before [recently], when people would talk about [roads] in the neighborhood, people would say, Oh, yeah, youre talking about the project to make a park here, she said. Everyone was like, We love the idea.

Over the last few months that sentiment in the community has abruptly shifted, culminating in a recent flood of letters from elected officials asking the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and Caltrans to not only explore putting a bus stop in the neighborhood, but to potentially scale back the freeway expansion.

We actually have a community who wants and needs access to the transit system, and right now were ignoring them, literally bypassing them, said City Councilmember David Alvarez, whose district includes Sherman Heights, in an email. Freeway projects bring air quality impacts to adjacent communities. If the community bears that burden, it has to share in the benefits.

In May, at Alvarezs request, planning officials gave a public presentation on the freeway expansion at the City Councils Environment Committee. Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez submitted a letter to officials the day of the meeting, with Councilmembers Marti Emerald, Myrtle Cole and Todd Gloria following up last week.

The changes for which Im advocating would make our transit system more robust and better ensure neighborhoods I represent are served with a stop, said Gloria, whose District 3 includes Golden Hill.

Elected officials are responding to the communitys growing dissatisfaction, said Monique Lopez, policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition, which has collected hundreds of signatures calling for officials to add a bus stop and scale back the freeway expansion.

Theres been this ask, saying, This is where we stand; will you stand with us? she said. And, theyve responded, and I think many community members are very appreciative of that.



Alternatives proposed by Caltrans for the State Route 94 expansion.

SANDAG Executive Director Gary Gallegos told *CityBeat* hes discussing with Caltrans the possibility of adding a bus stop in the area—which would require first building a transit and carpool ramp connecting Interstate 15 and Route 94, a project originally slated for 2035.

Theres a little bit of a jigsaw puzzle because youre trying to figure out how much money do I have, and how do you put all this together, he said.

As it currently stands, the project would add an elevated ramp for buses and



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As it currently stands, the project would add an elevated ramp for buses and carpooling between Interstate 805 and Route 94, which could stretch all the way to 30th Street, connecting to two new express lanes going into and out of Downtown. The \$600-million project would link to a network of rapid transit along I-805 to the south and I-15 to the north.

While the project is only a small part of SANDAG's multi-billion-dollar regional transportation plan, the fight over the freeway expansion has become a microcosm for one of the regions most contentious planning debates—cars versus public transportation.

While advocates argue freeway congestion encourages a shift towards public transportation, planning officials are relying on a different set of assumptions.

I think in this region, we've always looked at providing choices for travelers, and doing projects that benefit everyone, and not necessarily penalize a certain type of user over another one, said Gustavo Dallarda, Caltrans corridor director on the project.

However, that type of thinking has landed the regional transportation plan in the state Supreme Court, after several lower courts agreed the document didn't properly address state-mandated standards for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, largely caused by pollution from vehicles.

The Route 94 expansion represents outdated thinking, said Colin Parent, policy counsel for Circulate San Diego, a transportation think tank.

Cities all across the country are taking down urban freeways, and, yet, San Diego is working to expand them, he said in an email. Freeway expansions are looking more and more like an anachronism as more millennials and boomers are choosing to live in walkable compact communities.

As an alternative, advocates have asked officials to scale back the ramp and rather than have it lead to a new express lane, convert existing lanes into use for buses and carpooling. Caltrans planners have said they will consider including this option in an environmental impact review (EIR), which was expected in spring but has since been delayed.

This is the time to push, said Joe LaCava, chair of the Community Planners Committee, which represents local community planning groups on citywide issues. If we can't even get an alternative in an EIR, then why are we bothering with anything at all? That's the lowest threshold to try to think differently or act differently.

Congested freeways are a good motivator for people to take transit, he added. So it's, like, Why don't you do the transit first, and if the congestion gets too bad and intolerable, then you can do the freeway fix? So far, efforts have mainly focused on just getting regional planners to consider alternatives.

Moving forward with a project that squeezes the regions commuters, 75 percent of whom are solo drivers, would likely require a broader philosophical shift.

If we go out there today and close a lane, traffic is not going to get better, and if it's already bad, it's just going to get worse, Dallarda said. Maybe what we need is a study to show that—and that's the kind of stuff that we're looking at.



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