San Diego unions talk green, tests to come

Labor council adopts transit-first policy as pressure mounts to slow freeway expansion

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Four years ago, when activists sued a regional planning agency over a massive $214-billion spending plan to expand freeways and build public transportation, labor leaders voiced support for the cause.

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) 2050 Regional Transportation Plan didn’t properly measure its impact on greenhouse gas emissions, according to a lawsuit, now in the state Supreme Court, filed in 2011 by the Cleveland National Forest Foundation.

Activists and union officials agreed the transportation plan, an ever-evolving document that’s updated every four years, was too light on investment in trolley and...
other environmentally friendly transportation options.

At first, SANDAG, composed of elected officials representing San Diego County and 18 cities, showed little willingness to green up its plan. But since the lawsuit, the agency has made minor tweaks, moving some transit projects up in its multi-decade timeline.

However, with the scientific community ever more grim about the coming effects of global warming, the sense of urgency in the region grew over recent years, and critics of the planning agency have been far from satisfied with the changes.

In September, the advocacy group Environmental Health Coalition took a hard stand against any new freeway expansion. And, in February, the relatively moderate think tank Circulate San Diego sent a letter to SANDAG asking the agency to explore pushing a significant number of transit projects to the front of the construction queue.

Then, last week, the San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council unanimously adopted a transit resolution that read like an open letter to the regional planning agency. Brought forward by the labor councils environmental caucus, the document called for increased investment in public transportation projects over the next 10 years.

What we advocated is the transit-first agenda, said Richard Barrera, secretary-treasurer of the labor council. In the SANDAG plan, there’s a lot of transit work to be done. The question is, do we make that work a priority, or do we continue to do the freeway expansion first?

Formed last fall, the caucus has crusaded to boost the profile of environmentalism within the council. The resolution is the first major accomplishment for the caucus, which was formed by, among other unions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the American Federation of Teachers.

The contemporary context is that we have to make alliances with folks in the community because labor is under assault, said Jim Miller, caucus chair and professor of English and labor studies at San Diego City College. The only way I see labor surviving and prospering and building a real movement is through a kind of social-justice-unionism philosophy that’s not just about our narrow interests.

The resolution, which calls for building new transit infrastructure using union employees, puts growing pressure on SANDAG to put off freeway expansion until more public transportation projects are completed. Specifically, the resolution calls for half of all transportation in the urban core to consist of biking, walking and transit by prioritizing funding and implementation of an integrated network.

While voicing support for public transit projects isn’t a huge political risk for the labor council, seriously campaigning for such an agenda could be. The resolution put forth by the environmental caucus signals an internal debate within labor over how much to wager on green.

I don’t remember the unions coming out with such a forceful statement as this, said Carl Luna, political science professor at San Diego Mesa College. The question is when the labor council spends its political capital coming up, and it only has so much, how much is it going to put into actually making this real?

While pressuring elected officials to go greener might not directly affect wages and
benefits for the labor council's membership, the move would mirror a wider strategy of coalition building, exemplified by the national push by labor to raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour.

There's a political payoff because it re-solidifies the linkage between the labor movement, environmentalist and the progressive agenda in general, Luna said, and coming up on the minimum-wage debate in San Diego, the unions can use all the help they can get.

News of the resolution was welcomed by Monique Lopez, a policy advocate specializing in transit justice for the Environmental Health Coalition. But, rather than hailing the resolution as a sign of powerful reinforcements to come, she carefully observed the groups overlapping agendas.

Labor supporting a transit-first approach to regional transportation planning shows that such an approach provides great economic benefit to the region, she said. But, it also shows their dedication to their members who need a reliable, effective and affordable transit network.

Beyond forming alliances, pushing a green agenda does have broader appeal for union officials. The idea that investment in public transit is a direct subsidy to the working class has been a key tenet of labors environmental platform.

If people can get to and from work on public transit in 30 minutes or less, that's the equivalent of a nearly $3-an-hour raise, Barrera said.

At the same time, labor has already benefited from the green economy, especially in Imperial County, where the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 569 has put members to work building solar installations and wind turbines.

However, playing hardball with SANDAG would be something else entirely. A token resolution will likely have little impact on the planning agency's long-term vision for the region—a vision which officials staunchly maintain will include significant freeway expansion.

The focus on transit to the exclusion to everything else is something that we do hear from some folks, said Charles Stoll, SANDAG's director of land use and transportation planning, but I think our transportation planning has always been focused on a balance and giving people of the region a choice of transportation options.

In response to growing pressure from transit advocates, SANDAG staff gave a presentation on its regional plan at an annual board retreat in January. Looking at the feasibility of constructing all transit projects in the plan over the next 10 years, the analysis painted a picture of a costly and nearly impossible scenario.

The issue there is money, Stoll said, the fact that 35 years of transportation funding doesn't materialize in 10 years.

Environmental advocates took exception to the analysis. Circulate San Diego called on SANDAG in a formal letter to conduct a more nuanced study that looked at a more flexible time scale, stating: If certain transit investments are feasible to advance, and others are not, then the feasible projects should be modeled to occur earlier than other investments.

Given the agency's power and reluctance to back an aggressive environmental
agenda, its hard to predict what impact unions could have in this fight. Over the last 18 months, labor has taken major losses after doubling down on progressive candidates, such as San Diego City Councilmember David Alvarez, who lost a bid for mayor, as well as Democrat Carol Kim, who was defeated by Republican Chris Cate for San Diego City Council District 6.

At times, its almost appeared as if the labor council has been in free-fall since 2013, when state Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez left her former position as the councils secretary-treasurer. While there are myriad reasons for the labor councils recent list of political losses, the point remains that it hasn’t been experiencing its most triumphant movement.

Gonzalezs chief of staff, Evan McLaughlin—who formerly severed as the labor councils political director—said that union support for a green economy is nothing new.

One of the things that has always been an objective of labor is to provide a voice that isnt just relevant to union members but also to speak up for a better way of life for the entire workforce, he said. Labors advocacy for achieving a higher quality of life for workers through accessible and efficient transit should be a part of that.

Still, rhetoric from union officials has recently sounded convincingly more idealistic than calculating. Tom Lemmon, head of the San Diego County Building and Construction Trades Council, told CityBeat that in order to do whats right, unions have to take risks.

Clearly, if were going to stop global warming and try to neutralize our environment and try to keep it stable from where were heading, were going to have to make some changes, he said. I think when youre building a freeway, youre pushing a lot more dirt than you are when youre building a railway, so some of my folks will be impacted.

But, if you really do it right, and youre building twice as much railway as you were going to build freeways, he added optimistically, it should balance out.

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