

San Diego unions talk green, tests to come (<http://sdcitybeat.com/articles.sec-27-1-News.html>)

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 didnt 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 thats updated every four years, was too light on investment in trolley and

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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 weve advocated is the transit-first agenda, said Richard Barrera, secretary-treasurer of the labor council. In the SANDAG plan, theres 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 thats 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 isnt 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 dont 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

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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 hasnt 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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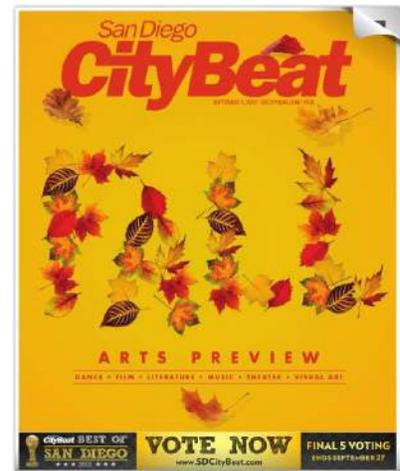
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