

Uncertainties of Measure A Go Beyond the \$18 Billion Total

Aside from big questions surrounding whether SANDAG's proposed sales tax increase will generate the amount the agency says it will, opponents point to other promises they think could go unfulfilled — like whether SANDAG will complete the highest-priority projects within 15 years, whether it will use local labor and whether the measure will do anything to improve water quality.

Photo by Sam Hodgson



Cars line up to head onto Interstate 5 North on Del Mar Heights Road in Carmel Valley.

By [Maya Srikrishnan](#) | October 24, 2016

Measure A, the sales tax hike proposed by the San Diego Association of Governments, promises to do many things.

It says it will build a new trolley line, provide new bus routes and train stations. It says some of these public transit and road projects will be done in 15 years. It says it will give money to all the jurisdictions in the county for local infrastructure projects, which can range from repairing potholes to upgrading storm water infrastructure to protecting

crumbling cliffs along the ocean. It says it will preserve open space and protect species throughout the county.

That seems like a good deal, but while the tax proposal has a coalition of support from across the political spectrum, it also has garnered a wide spectrum of opposition: from people who just don't want taxes to people who want more highways to people who want fewer highways to people who want more of a guarantee that these projects will be tied to local jobs.

Here's what the measure will actually do and what might not happen.

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SANDAG estimates that the measure will raise about **\$18.2 billion** over the next 40 years through a half-cent sales tax. Roughly 42 percent of that money would go to public transit projects; 14 percent to highway improvements; 30 percent to individual cities to spend on local infrastructure; 11 percent to open space preservation and 3 percent to walking and biking projects.

The \$18.2 billion number, however, has major issues – and [there's reason to believe that amount won't ever materialize](#). SANDAG is counting on an unprecedented surge in spending in order to hit that mark. And the agency has acknowledged that money raised by Measure A could go toward separate projects that were supposed to be funded by a previous tax hike, Transnet. Transnet is on track to fall billions short of the amount SANDAG told voters it would bring in.

Whatever the measure ultimately raises and whichever projects get built will chip away at the \$204 billion worth of projects SANDAG has laid out in its [regional transportation plan](#).

“Without a measure like this, a project like the Purple Line might not be funded,” said SANDAG Executive Director Gary Gallegos of the largest, costliest transportation project in Measure A, a \$4.4 billion new trolley line running from San Ysidro to Kearney Mesa that SANDAG has promised will be built within 15 years if the measure passes. “This helps with a lot of major capital projects. Local funding was needed to meet the \$204 billion plan.”

Opponents say the regional transportation plan is part of the problem in itself.

“Measure A funds a flawed transportation plan that [undermines San Diego’s Climate Action Plan](#), fails to meet state targets to address climate change and makes no guarantees to solve the serious problems our region faces to build out and modernize our transportation system,” Gretchen Newsom, the political director for IBEW Local 569, one of the members of the Quality of Life Coalition, which opposes SANDAG’s measure.

The open space funding would also help fund a commitment San Diego made to protect endangered species on preserved lands years ago – an agreement it’s never really figured out how to pay for. Half of that would go to acquiring lands and the rest would be used to maintain and monitor those lands.

Whatever tax money is raised won’t fully fund everything on its own.

For the construction of the new transit projects, like the Purple Line, the money raised by Measure A would be used to try and get grants from the state and federal government. Usually those grants require local jurisdictions to put up matching funds.

Encinitas Mayor and County Supervisor candidate Kristin Gaspar [said she is opposed to the measure](#) in part because a small city like Encinitas wouldn’t be able to put up the matching funds to be competitive for those grants without taking on debt.

The Quality of Life Coalition, made up of several groups that oppose the measure, including the Climate Action Campaign, Environmental Health Coalition and IBEW 569, points to the Mid-Coast Trolley project as an example of what can be expected to happen with even the most exciting proposals in Measure A. Mid-Coast was promised years ago and partially funded by the 2004 Transnet extension. The region just received a \$1 billion grant last month from the federal government to complete the project.

While SANDAG has promised to complete several of the Measure A projects in 15 years, it’s only legally bound to finish those within that time period barring any extenuating

circumstances. For example, SANDAG has been able to partially make up for its revenue shortfall with TransNet by getting more state and federal funding than it accounted for. That could be the case for Measure A, but if it takes a while to get matching funds from the federal or state government or there's a cut in transportation funding, that's out of the agency's hands and it might not be held accountable in court for such a delay.

"For all the projects that require a match, if there were a year that got cut, that could impact schedules," Gallegos said.

Newsom said that makes the 15-year guarantee in the ordinance language meaningless.

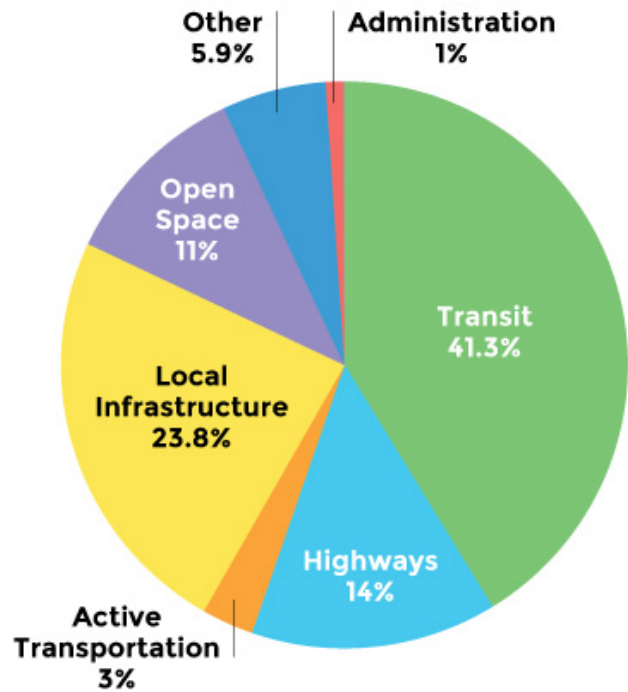
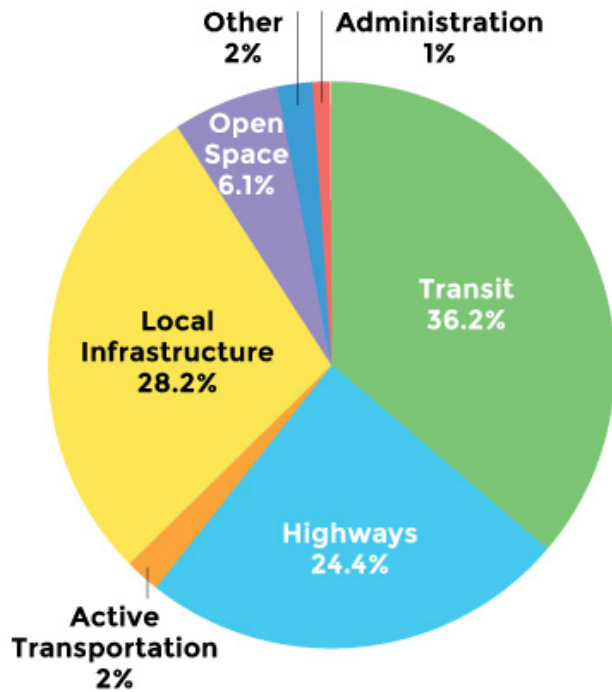
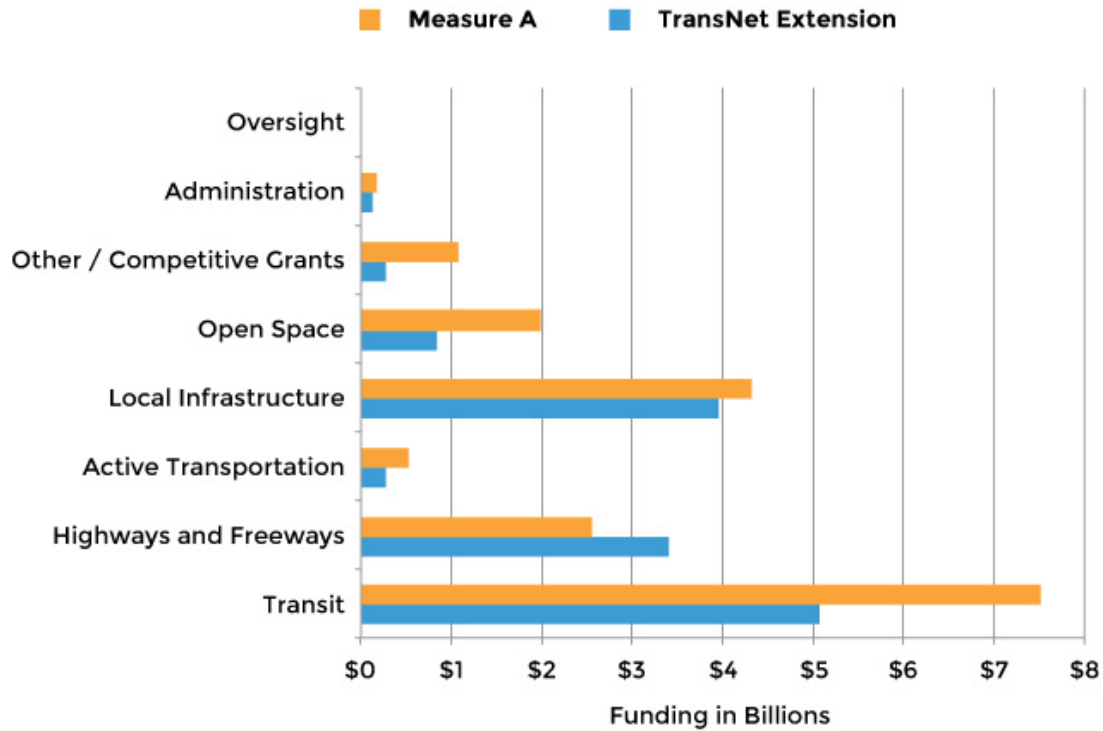
"It would be onerous to prove they didn't make their best-faith effort," Newsom said. "Because what does that mean?"

The timeline issue is particularly problematic for the environmentalists opposed to the measure. The city just passed a much lauded Climate Action Plan and many of its greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals are dependent on public transit. Waiting too long for these projects might jeopardize some of those goals.

"We've been advocating for over a year with SANDAG to get a better measure, not a perfect measure," Newsom said. "Something that would move the needle on doing something about climate change and something that really does something for public transit. This locks us in for 40 years. You get one chance to get it done right and it's not being done right."

Measure A would spend more on transit and less on highways than SANDAG's previous transportation and infrastructure tax, the TransNet extension from 2004. Most of the highway funds go to projects that SANDAG was already committed to doing under that previous measure.

Measure A vs. TransNet



* Funding projected by SANDAG for Transnet Extension and Measure A

SANDAG carefully crafted Measure A after years of back-and-forth trying to make all the different stakeholders happy and after lots of [polling](#) to see what would stand a chance with voters. Things like highways, infrastructure and [reduced traffic](#) polled the best.

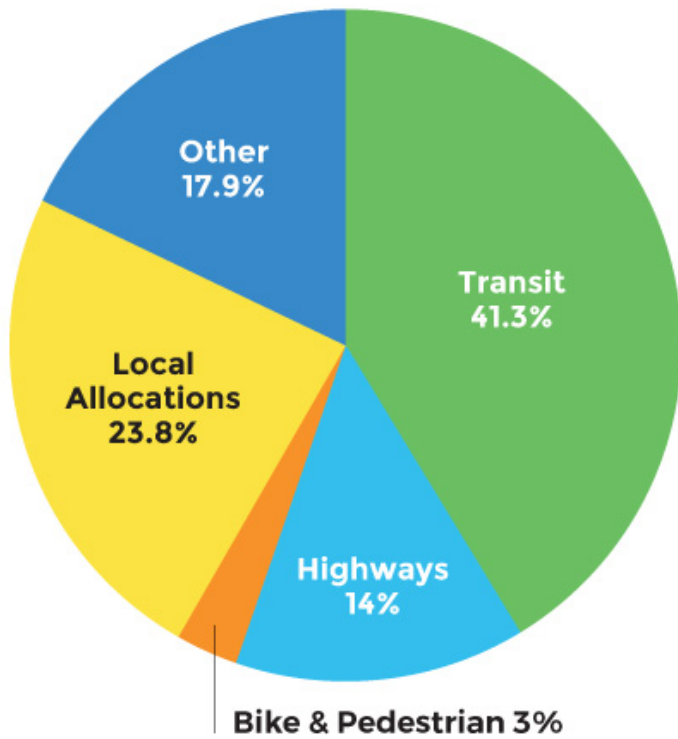
“We’ve been advocating for over a year with SANDAG to get a better measure, not a perfect measure,” said Newsom. “One of the things that many people in San Diego don’t realize, they’re currently paying another sales tax through SANDAG.”

Tax increases like Measure A require more than two-thirds of the vote to pass.

Statewide, there are roughly a dozen transportation ballot measures. SANDAG has the third highest in transportation spending of all the measures, behind Los Angeles and the Bay Area (the Bay Area has four different measures that I averaged together). And SANDAG would portion out the second smallest percentage toward roads, only after Sacramento.

Statewide Transportation Measures

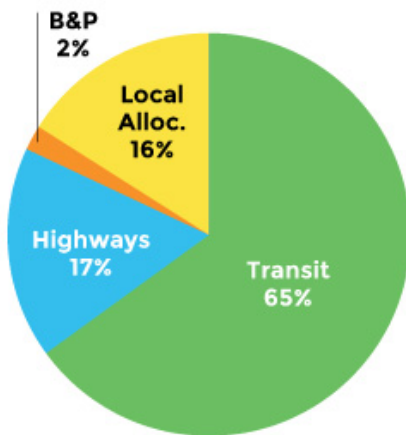
How San Diego Stacks Up



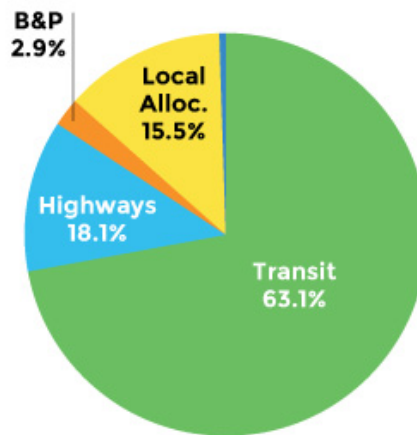
San Diego Association of Governments

Projected Funding Generated:
\$18.194 billion

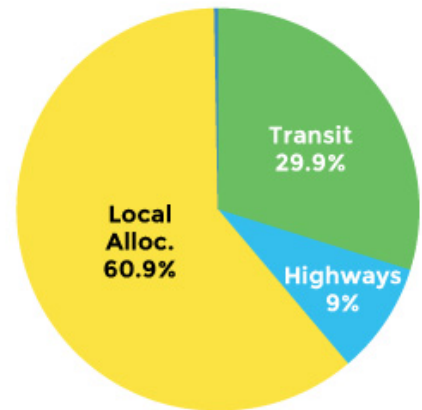
- Transit: 41.3%
- Highways: 14%
- Bike & Pedestrian: 3%
- Local Allocations: 23.8%
- Other: 17.9%



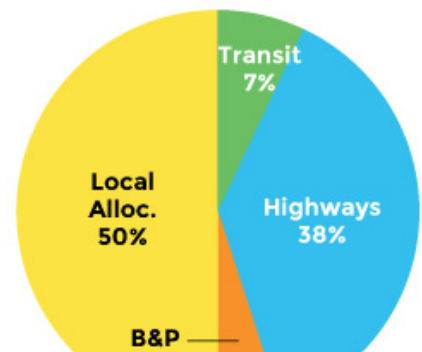
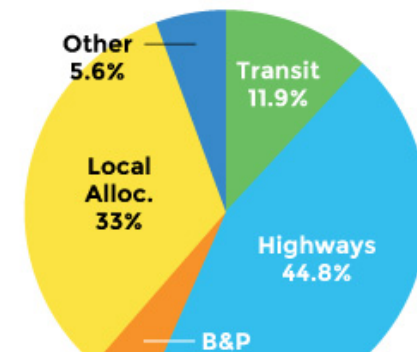
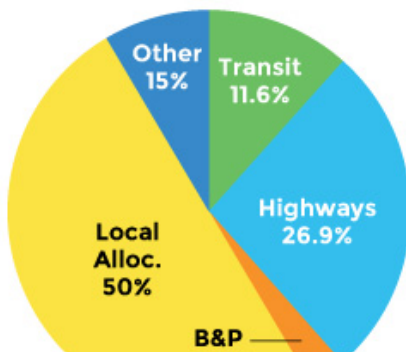
Los Angeles County
\$120 billion



Bay Area
\$12.689 billion



Sacramento County
\$3.6 billion





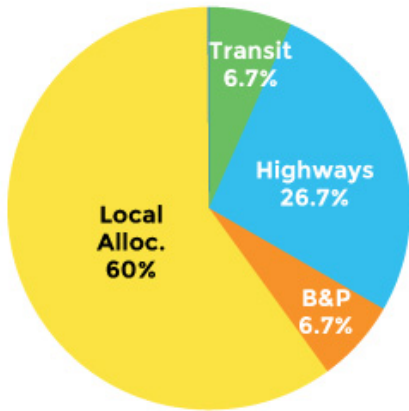
Ventura County
\$3.3 billion



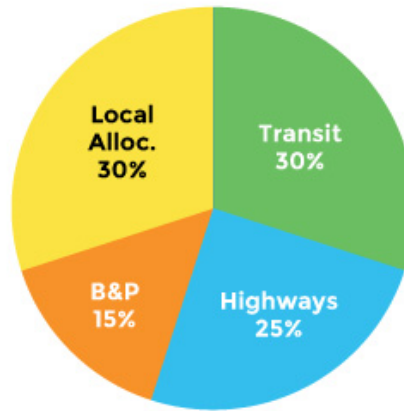
Placer County
\$1.6 billion



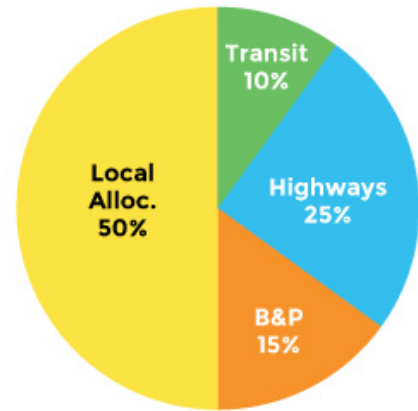
Stanislaus County
\$960.3 million



Monterey County
\$600 million



Santa Cruz County
\$450 million



San Luis Obispo County
\$225 million

“It’s not enough of an increase,” said Newsom. “It’s still over-reliance on highways and freeways, which cause health issues. They also have a bad habit of widening freeways.”

Environmentalists who oppose the project want no highway projects whatsoever. They are particularly concerned about widening a portion of Interstate 5 south near National City, a project SANDAG is already committed to completing under TransNet.

SANDAG also included language in the ordinance to try to appease labor concerns. It added a member to the oversight board who would represent labor interests (it also added a seat for an environmentalist) and said it would try to guarantee local hires where it could.

But Newsom said her organization wanted project labor agreements, contracts that would guarantee those projects went to unionized labor.

“This is one of the only, in my opinion, tried and true ways to ensure you have a local workforce,” said Newsom. “You see throughout the proposal, they’re trying and making the effort, but it’s not hashed out in law what’s a good faith effort.”

This map shows the projects SANDAG says it will complete within 15 years if Measure A passes:

SANDAG has laid out many specific projects, but also tried to work in some flexibility. With the TransNet tax, all the money that went to local governments went to roads. Gallegos said this time around, some local governments wanted to be able to use that money for other things.

“The area where there is the greatest flexibility is in the local system,” he said. “The board’s discussions and deliberation was that the diversity of needs in the 18 cities and the county are very different from one city to the next. So there, we expanded.”

That flexibility has become an issue with the measure’s opponents in two ways.

First, they worry about a lack of oversight as to how local governments will use that money.

And second, the flexibility allows SANDAG to promote its measure – and even write its ballot language – to say the measure will do some things that only *might* happen if the measure passes.

The opposition even [sued the agency](#) to change its ballot language.

For example, they took issue with the water quality claims.

The local infrastructure money could be used for storm water projects, [which Imperial Beach’s mayor has suggested his city would do in the face of rising sea levels](#). But there’s nothing guaranteeing that any city must choose to use that money for projects that could improve water quality.

“They could choose to do something with storm water,” Newsom said. “They could choose to do other things, like fill potholes. But there are no requirements. That’s a significant amount of money that has very little accountability to the taxpayer.”

In a [deposition](#), Gallegos said SANDAG would use the latest technology to deal with the surface water runoff when it expands highways. That would improve water quality, he said.

That language wasn’t changed by a judge.

If the measure doesn’t pass, SANDAG, local politicians, environmentalists, unions and other stakeholders may have to go back to the drawing board to put together another measure. The transportation projects would still be in the agency’s long-term plan, and SANDAG would still need to fund open space preservation, so the agency will have to figure out a way to fill those funding gaps.

And even if the measure does pass, it may not raise the \$18 billion promised, meaning some of the projects promised in the measure could still go unfunded.