

Aligning Systems with Communities to Advance Equity through Shared Measurement:

Connect SoCal (SB 375)

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| Lead organization: | Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) |
| Lead system: | Local/regional government |
| Partner systems: | Cities (191), counties (6), tribal governments |
| Location: | Six counties in Southern California |
| Year founded: | Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act (SB 375) passed in 2008; Connect SoCal is a plan for 2020–2045 |
| Measurement: | Multiple measures show how improvements in transportation infrastructure and urban planning reduce greenhouse gas emissions |

How did the initiative start?

To implement California’s landmark Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375), the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) adopted a regional transportation and land use plan for Southern California, called Connect SoCal. Connect SoCal (2020–2045), was adopted in September 2020, and includes transportation and land use strategies, programs, and projects that will result in improved mobility and public health, a more sustainable growth pattern, and a strengthened economy and environment. This plan also charts a path for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and achieving the state assigned GHG target.

SCAG develops the region’s long-range plan, Connect SoCal, every 4 years. SCAG is the nation’s largest metropolitan planning organization, representing six counties, 191 cities, several tribal governments, and nearly 19 million residents. Connect SoCal’s goals fall into four core categories: economy, mobility, environment, and healthy communities. The plan explicitly lays out goals related to housing, transportation technologies, equity, and resilience to adequately reflect the increasing importance of these topics in the region. Where possible, the goals link to potential performance measures and targets. Connect SoCal includes performance measures established both by federal policies—for example, Moving Ahead of Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21)—and the state policy, SB 375. Additional measures included in the plan are based on input from stakeholders and community members.

How does the initiative use shared measurement?

Connect SoCal’s primary desired outcomes include improvements in regional air quality, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, improved public health, and achieving location efficiency. Other outcomes include an increase in active transportation such as biking and walking, and more transit modes that allow different types of vehicles for specific routes. Federal and state requirements determine some of the plan’s performance metrics. According to Sarah Jepson, Planning Director of SCAG, *“Achieving air quality performance standards is necessary for ensuring projects receive federal transportation funds. On the state side, we need to achieve a certain reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. We need to measure these components to meet our federal and state requirements.”*

SCAG uses performance metrics in the planning process to compare different planning scenarios, identify plan benefits, and monitor progress. For example, SCAG monitors regional transportation safety performance annually to set safety targets. For calendar year 2020, SCAG aims to reduce deaths by 3% and serious injuries by 1.5%, with the goal of reaching zero transportation-related deaths by 2050, if not sooner. *“We primarily use measurement as a tool to advocate for change,”* said Ms. Jepson. Measurement helps organizations understand whether trends are moving in the right direction. According to Ms. Jepson, *“Except for the federal and state-mandated metrics, we don’t have specific targets. Currently, our progress is measured directionally.”*

County and city governments use the Connect SoCal plan for planning and benchmarking. The regional plan projects growth at the county and city level to help local agencies plan for growth in population and jobs. It also sets transportation priorities and identifies resources at a regional level to address the current and future needs of a changing population. Local agencies can use the Connect SoCal plan to assess the number of walkable paths necessary to improve population health. The metrics help monitor and assess how things are changing at a regional level and justify additional resources for active transportation projects.

In addition to federal and state-mandated performance metrics, SCAG’s Regional Council supports the integration of other performance metrics, including those relating to public health, such as evaluating forecasted rates of chronic disease based on built environment changes and daily minutes per capita spent walking and biking. Connect SoCal documents the social determinants of health in the region. Some metrics, such as trip distance, are already built into existing transportation models and are used to assess the impact of the various interventions on health. As Ms. Jepson notes, *“For public health, we extrapolate some of the transportation model outputs to forecast reduced rates of chronic disease. Those metrics are currently more for advocacy. Local governments may reference them to support why they need to adopt transportation and land use strategies detailed in the plan.”*

How do systems work together?

SCAG is an association of local governments and agencies that voluntarily convene as a forum to address regional issues. The SCAG region encompasses six counties (Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura) and 191 cities in an area covering more than 38,000 square miles. Stakeholders helped Connect SoCal identify the goals, outcomes, and performance metrics of the plan. These stakeholders included local governments, tribal governments, county transportation commissions, nonprofits, businesses, and the public.

SCAG engages city representatives as key stakeholders during the planning process and asks for input from cities and counties on where they think the region is heading. Using cities' initial input as a starting point via a local input process, SCAG convenes regional planning working groups with various stakeholders, nonprofits, and cities on issues such as active transportation, public health, and transit. According to Ms. Jepson, *“Depending on the metrics we’re working on—sometimes it’s more stakeholder driven, or [community-based organization] CBO-driven, and sometimes more by the local agencies, especially the areas that are more regulatory.”* The working groups provide input on the plan and select metrics over time, and ultimately, SCAG staff develop recommendations that are shared with policy committees and the Regional Council. The Regional Council, which consists of elected officials representing the 191 cities, decides on the final set of metrics. Once the plan is approved, local governments use the selected metrics in their own planning and monitoring activities.

California state regulations allocated resources to help the region move its established plan forward. For example, for greenhouse gas reduction targets, cities worked together to formulate a transportation and land use plan and began to think about investing in different ways. Ms. Jepson said, *“With state money we were able to start funding local planning projects to help those agencies work toward our regional goals. So, we started with some seed money from the state, but now have \$5 million a year to help further the goals of our Sustainable Communities Strategy. It can’t just be a feel-good project; it has to help us meet our targets.”* A statewide focus on reducing greenhouse gases and different pilot projects in various parts of the state helped Connect SoCal move more quickly in the right direction. Measurement helped identify and amplify successes that the coalition could point to as examples for others. SCAG learned from initiatives in the Bay Area, and the Bay Area learned from Connect SoCal’s successes. *“It’s created these networks, because we’re all required to work toward the same goal, but we’re not required to take a scripted pathway,”* said Ms. Jepson.

How does the initiative engage community members?

SCAG worked with CBOs to obtain community input on the Connect SoCal plan. SCAG held 28 community workshops and public forums with more than 600 participants about the 2020–2045 plan. CBOs conducted workshops in English and Spanish to gather input from community members on priority issues such as housing, active transportation, environmental justice, air quality, and transportation. The workshops provided an opportunity to introduce the Connect SoCal plan to community members and connect the plan’s broader goals to their daily lives. Ms. Demi Espinoza, Senior Equity & Policy Manager for Safe Routes National Partnership, said, *“The great thing about the workshops was really emphasizing how Connect SoCal is relevant to the daily lives of community residents, how Connect SoCal is a blueprint of policies, a blueprint of how jurisdictions will invest their time and money. So, it’s really important to talk about what changes they want to see in the community, and how their desired projects or policies could be emphasized in the plan.”*

SCAG used this feedback to inform the Connect SoCal plan and to create an inventory of how the 191 cities in the region are addressing the priority issues that community members identified. According to Ms. Espinoza, *“Having an inventory to be able to go back and track the progress of plans, and to be able to say, this is where we are, this is where they’re going, is really beneficial. The inventory helped keep jurisdictions on track to ensure projects are getting lifted off the ground and progressing.”*



Spotlight on Equity and Environmental Justice Metrics

The Connect SoCal plan assesses federal environmental justice (EJ) metrics to make sure that the plan does not have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities. As defined by the plan, “the concept of environmental justice (EJ) is about equal and fair access to a healthy environment with the goal of protecting minority and low-income communities from incurring disproportionate negative environmental impacts.” As Ms. Jepson commented, “Equity will become more and more a part of what we’re doing. Our policies can’t push us in a direction where some communities and people are worse off, or you have to mitigate it.” The plan uses metrics capturing job–housing balance (the distribution of jobs relative to the distribution of workers in a geographic area), neighborhood change and displacement, access to employment and services, travel time and travel distance savings, access to parks and schools, and commuting distance across income levels.

SCAG created an EJ working group comprised of diverse stakeholders including representatives from CBOs and EJ advocates. The working group contributed to the development of an EJ toolbox that includes best practices to help combat adverse impacts of the plan on disadvantaged communities. The EJ toolbox recommends practices and approaches that can be used by local jurisdictions to develop their EJ goals and policies. For example, the passage of SB 1000 requires local jurisdictions with disadvantaged communities to incorporate EJ policies and goals in their plans. According to Ms. Demi Espinoza, Senior Equity & Policy Manager for Safe Routes National Partnership, “I think the EJ toolbox could not only help bridge the gap in planning processes and ensure these EJ policies and issue areas are brought into those local plans, but it can also set jurisdictions up for when they need to do their mandate for the SB 1000.”

While developing the Connect SoCal plan, SCAG looked for active transportation hazards, climate vulnerability, and public health issues. In addition to using existing quantitative data, SCAG completed a series of workshops with community members and EJ groups to understand their key concerns. For example, community members wanted to understand how to create restricted truck routes near schools. According to Ms. Espinoza, “We wanted to get a lot more data on warehouses to better understand how to do restricted truck routes near schools. We discussed the kind of policies around warehouse citing since having warehouses near schools is not healthy for students.” One recommended practice in the EJ toolbox is to restrict sensitive public facilities, such as schools and hospitals, from being located near industrial facilities or high-volume roadways that pose a hazard to health and safety.

Another issue that community members raised was that they wanted more safe routes to public parks so people living in disadvantaged communities can access parks for recreation, exercise, and connection to nature. During development of the Connect SoCal plan, representatives from parks and recreation departments in counties and cities across Southern California participated in the EJ working group to share lessons learned and best practices. For example, Clement Lau from the LA County Department of Parks and Recreation shared about LA County’s Parks Needs Assessment. Mr. Lau said, “We engaged all the cities and unincorporated areas in LA County to gather information about parks and specifically looked at five parks’ related metrics including park land in term of the park acreage per one thousand residents, park access in terms of percentage of residents within the half mile walk to a park, park pressure in terms of the population density around parks, park amenities offered at each park, and the physical condition of each park.” With this input, the EJ toolbox recommended increased access to diverse, high-quality parks, green space, recreational facilities, and natural environments for traditionally underserved communities as well as investment in pedestrian and bicycle access to parks, open spaces, and other essential services through infrastructure investments and improvements.



Spotlight on Equity and Environmental Justice Metrics (continued)

In addition to providing input on strategies for the EJ toolbox, the Department of LA County Parks and Recreation used some active transportation metrics put in place by SCAG for updating their own 2016 Parks Needs Assessment. For example, SCAG studied access to parks, especially by different modes of transportation, and used metrics like the 30-minute drive or public transit to a park. LA County Department of Parks and Recreation is now using these metrics to better understand access to parks using different transportation modalities. “The LA County Metro is using the information from the LA County Parks Needs Assessment to identify areas where there should be more investment in public transit to connect folks from park-poor areas to natural areas or facilities that they may not be able to reach otherwise,” said Mr. Lau. The department is updating their needs assessment in 2020 to include metrics that measure the need for parks in rural areas as well as access to regional recreation facilities and open space, especially for low-income communities. According to Mr. Lau, “In 2016, when we did our initial needs assessment, the word ‘equity’ wasn’t commonly used. Today, we are specifically trying to address equity-related issues with parks focusing on low-income communities and communities of color.”

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