

Pandemic Life: How COVID-19 Is Changing San Diego's Transportation Planning

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By Andrew Bowen



A year ago this week, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued a statewide stay-at-home order to curb the rapidly spreading coronavirus. Businesses shuttered, millions began working from home and overnight, jammed highways became open roads and bustling public transit stops became ghost towns.

Today, both highway traffic and transit ridership are up from the [low points](#) of last year. But they remain down significantly from pre-COVID-19 levels as many are still unemployed or working from home. This has transportation experts and politicians pondering the pandemic's potential long-term effects on the region's mobility needs.

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) is [preparing to overhaul](#) its regional transportation plan to meet aggressive greenhouse

gas reduction mandates. SANDAG officials acknowledge remote work could change their calculus but caution it's too early to know by how much.

Meanwhile, they are focusing on the more immediate lessons learned from the past year, especially regarding racial and social equity.

Andrew Picard, chief programs officer for the nonprofit San Diego Workforce Partnership, used to commute 10 miles to work each way. The drive would take up to an hour and Picard would sometimes work late just to avoid the evening rush hour. Now his commute is all of 20 feet.

"It takes me, you know, two minutes to get from my bedroom to the living room or wherever I'll be parked for the day," Picard said with a laugh.

The benefits of remote working have been clear to Picard: He has saved a lot of money on gas and car insurance. He can schedule virtual meetings back-to-back rather than having to drive across the county. And he gets to spend more time with his cat, Winston.

Even as more people get vaccinated and offices reopen, Picard said his job would likely stay remote at least part of the week. Company surveys have shown most of his colleagues prefer a "hybrid work environment."

"People are really keen to have flexibility," Picard said. "And I think what the pandemic has proven is in many industries you can be as productive, or more productive, in a remote environment."

It's an entirely different story for Roddy Jerome, whose job providing [in-home support services](#) for the elderly and disabled cannot be done remotely. He commutes from his home in City Heights to a client's apartment in Santee by bus, trolley and bike. It typically takes an hour and a half each way, sometimes more.

Jerome said he likes moving around and has no interest in working from home, but he still wants a faster commute.

"A more direct way of getting here, instead of having to transfer or to go from bus to trolley — that would make it a lot easier," Jerome said. "Then I'd have more time to do other things."



Widening disparities

The stark difference between Picard and Jerome's commuting experience under COVID-19 belies a larger truth: Jobs that allow for remote working tend to pay higher salaries and are more likely to be held by white people. Jobs where remote working will never be an option generally pay less and more likely to be held by people of color.

That's according to data gathered by SANDAG. Throughout the pandemic, the agency has been documenting the disproportionate impacts COVID-19 has had on Black and Latino populations — both in terms of infection rates and unemployment.

"That disparity made us think harder about social equity, social justice, about getting rid of the sins of the past when it comes to transportation," said Hasan Ikhata, executive director of SANDAG.

Those "sins of the past," Ikhata said, include bulldozing low-income communities of color to build freeways while placing the best transportation infrastructure in wealthier areas. Last month, the SANDAG board of directors approved a "Commitment to Equity Statement" meant to guide future planning. Ikhata said SANDAG staff are also working on an equity index that will measure each project's value in terms of lifting up historically marginalized communities.

Ikh rata gave an example of how the index would be used: Say SANDAG is reviewing a highway interchange versus a bikeway and trying to decide which project to fund first.

"Even though the interchange for the freeway might have money and might seem logical, if the social index said you should do the bikeway, we'll do the bikeway," Ikh rata said. "That's going to upset some people. But that is how you get rid of the sins of the past."

Temporary or lasting change?

Public transit ridership has plummeted during the pandemic and has been slow to recover, with weekday trips on the Metropolitan Transit System down by about 60% last month compared to February 2020. Buses, trolleys and trains have kept running thanks to subsidies from the various federal relief bills.

Critics of spending tax dollars on public transit have seized on those figures to argue the expensive network of fixed rail lines that Ikh rata wants to build is a fool's errand. County Supervisor Jim Desmond [told KUSI](#) last August that remote working and technological advancements would eliminate the need for new rail infrastructure, which he called "ideas from the 1800s."

COVID-19 Impact on Transportation

This chart shows the percentage change in average daily trips on San Diego County highway hotspots, and the percentage change in average weekday trips on the Metropolitan Transit System, compared to one year prior.

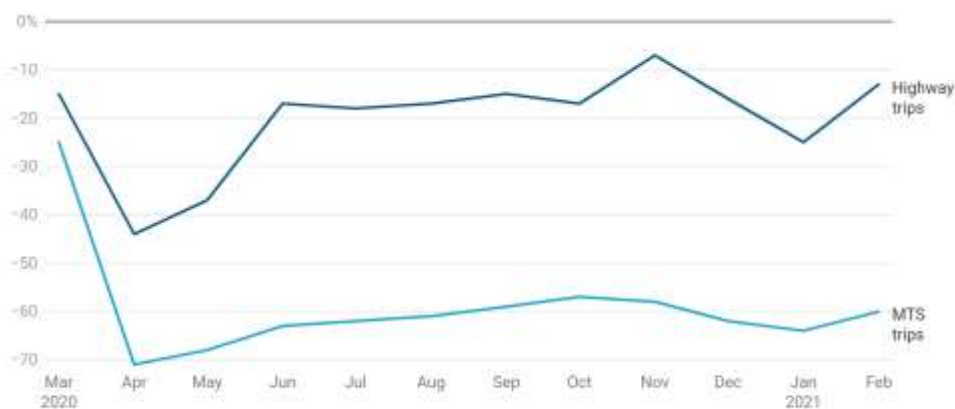


Chart: Andrew Bowen • Source: SANDAG, MTS • [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

Highway travel is also down, though not nearly as much as transit ridership. And even as traffic volumes have recovered, the [average travel speed](#) — a rough proxy for congestion relief — has stayed well above pre-pandemic levels. At the virtual public transit convention [Transit-Con](#) on Jan. 31, consultant Christof Spieler [said it was ironic](#) for people to question the future of public transit simply because of the current moment.

"I've seen every highway agency continue full-speed ahead with every line they've ever drawn on the maps for the last 30 years, and they aren't questioning, 'do we need to add all of these lanes to relieve an hour of congestion in the morning commute?'" Spieler said.

Ikhata said a future with more people working from home could make highway expansions unnecessary: Highway travel could be spread more evenly throughout the day, shrinking rush hour traffic. More families may choose to share one car while also using transit or other modes of travel, he added.



PHOTO BY [ANDREW BOWEN](#)

SANDAG Executive Director Hasan Ikhata stands in front of the future Balboa Avenue station on the Mid-Coast Trolley, March 5, 2021

SANDAG has adjusted its assumptions to account for more people working from home and predicts it will reduce greenhouse gas emissions somewhat — just not nearly enough. Ultimately, Ikhata said, it would be unwise to base a generation of transportation planning on a one-time event, no matter how dramatic it might be in the short-term.

"The pandemic will be over," Ikhata said. "It's short-sighted to say, 'Scrap everything, let's start over again.'"

Roddy Jerome, whose low-carbon commute by transit and bike is the kind SANDAG is supposed to encourage, said when he looks beyond the pandemic, he still sees better public transit as key to his livelihood and a healthier planet.

"If we're trying to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, which is important to our climate action plan, they have to make (transit) better," Jerome said. "You have to make people want to get out of their cars. And if they can't do that, it won't happen."