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State Route 94 becomes battleground in San Diego region's transportation fight

Environmentalists take a hard stand against highway expansion

By Joshua Emerson Smith



Tensions recently swelled over a planned freeway expansion in the heart of the city. A key transportation artery that pumps vehicles in and out of Downtown is slated for major surgery. While planners have said the construction is necessary to boost the city's bus system, environmentalists have called that explanation "green washing."

With a cost of \$600 million, the project would expand State Route 94 by building another level on top of the existing highway between 22nd Street and Interstate 805. The two miles of new "managed lanes" would service carpooling and buses, linking up to "bus rapid transit" networks along Interstate 15 to the north and a similar project planned along I-805 to the south.

While regional officials marketed the expansion as transit-friendly, activists have taken a firm stand. In a city where about 75 percent of commuters are solo drivers and only 4 percent use mass transit, critics argued that, to incentivize transit and carpooling, "managed lanes" should simply replace existing lanes.

"What if we were to do paint before pavement and then use the existing funds to have other transit benefits?" said Monique Lopez, policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition. "When you widen freeways it doesn't relieve congestion. "What happens is, usually within a four-to-five-year time period, you're back up to the same level of congestion."

Project planners with the California Department of Transportation and the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) said they analyzed such an alternative and found painting managed lanes on the existing highway would significantly slow down the buses and increase traffic.

"It doesn't work very well with the concept of bus rapid transit," said Gustavo Dallarda, Caltrans

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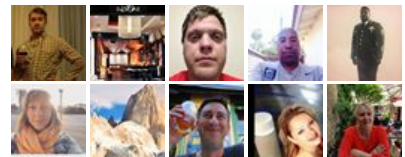
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corridor director. "The concept is to have a dedicated guide-way where the bus can basically travel at freeway speeds."

Recently, the project grabbed the attention of progressive City Councilmember David Alvarez. Route 94 divides his District 8 to the south from Councilmember Todd Gloria's District 3 to the north. Docketing the issue for the City Council's Environment Committee on Wednesday, May 20, Alvarez has called for a public discussion on the project.

"How will we use this opportunity and funding to provide real transit solutions that extend to the adjacent neighborhoods?" he said. "From the current alternatives, I don't see the community benefit."

While the project is expected to knock out more than a dozen residential properties and could potentially lead to increased air pollution over time, residents have also voiced frustration that it doesn't include a bus stop for any of the directly impacted communities.

"I'm concerned about the lack of a [bus rapid transit] stop serving Golden Hill and Sherman Heights, and I will be advocating for its inclusion," said Gloria, who also sits on the Environment Committee.

However, environmentalists have been clear that they're looking for more than a bus stop. They have argued the expansion project is an example of widespread regional transportation planning that fails to aggressively adopt long-term climate change and air-pollution-reduction strategies.

"The local communities who are battling [the expansion of Route] 94 are actually doing a favor for everyone in our region," said Jack Shu, president of the Cleveland National Forest Foundation's Board of Directors. "What they could win is a win for looking at transportation differently in our region."

Along the same lines, the Cleveland National Forest Foundation has sued SANDAG on its plan to expand a 27-mile stretch of Interstate 5 by four "managed lanes" for buses and carpooling. The project is part of a \$6.5-billion package that includes enhancing the trolley system and adding bike lanes.

"Somewhere along the line we have to change the thinking process and priorities of our elected officials," Shu said. "We have one of the best freeway systems in the country if not the world, but we have a transit system that's quite deficient."

Project funding comes with restrictions that often dictate what can be built, said Gloria, who also sits on the SANDAG Board of Directors and chairs the agency's transportation committee.

"As much as I will always support the investment into alternative transportation options, most transportation funding is not flexible on its use," he said. "Federal and state highway funds simply cannot be used for transit projects."

When it comes to several highway expansions, Caltrans has argued that it's bound by Transnet—a half-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2004—which among other projects, specifically calls for the addition of two high-occupancy-vehicle (HOV) lanes along Route 94 between I-5 and Interstate 8.

"If you go to the Transnet measure it talks about new HOV lanes," Dallarda said. "It doesn't talk about converting. It goes as far as describing how many lanes you have in addition to the HOV lanes."

While specific language in the text can be amended by a two-thirds vote of the SANDAG board or a vote of the people, it's unclear whether the agency would entertain such an idea.

What's clear is that many local professionals want to maintain their ability to drive to work in San Diego's relatively traffic-free environment.

"Our employees need to have transportation options in order to efficiently get back and forth to work," said Melanie Nally, associate director of Local Government & Regulatory Affairs BIOCUM, a trade organization for San Diego's life sciences industry. "In the real world, people get back and forth in their vehicles."

Environmentalists argue that such an approach won't adequately incentivize the use of public transit. SANDAG's ever-evolving, multi-billion-dollar regional transportation plan—which encompasses projects such as the expansion of Route 94—has been found by several courts to not properly address state-mandated standards for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, largely caused by pollution from vehicles.

In review now by the state Supreme Court, the plan has come under significant scrutiny for pushing highway expansion to the front of the queue while putting off mass transit projects for decades.

Even less hard-line transportation groups have started pushing the planning agency to explore an alternative lineup of projects. Earlier this year, with the support of the American Lung Association, Circulate San Diego asked SANDAG to at least explore a transit-first approach.



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