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Summary of Interviews with California Metropolitan Planning Organizations About Senate Bill 375 and the Sustainable Communities Strategies

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16. Abstract In July and August of 2020, a research team of four graduate students from UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning conducted interviews with directors and other high-level staff representing several of California's metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to gather information on the achievements and challenges associated with the implementation of SB 375. Key takeaways from this effort include: 1) MPOs are not requesting additional authorities or oversight of local land use decisions; 2) MPOs use funding as "carrots" to incentivize local plans to align with regional goals, and many MPOs desire more discretionary funding and priority-specific funding; 3) some MPOs want to focus on greenhouse gas (GHG) strategies, such as telecommuting, active transportation, and technological advancement, in order to meet their GHG emission targets; 4) MPOs want the State to develop policies in ways that acknowledge distinct planning nuances and economic and geographic contexts across regions; 5) the process of developing and submitting regional plans to the State for review is staff-intensive and technically complex for MPOs, which takes away from the agencies' capacity to focus on implementation and other work; 6) Senate Bill 375 has empowered MPOs to consider more deeply the relationship between land use and transportation; and 7) as a result of Senate Bill 375, there is now increased communication and engagement between the MPO and a broader set of stakeholders.					
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Introduction

This report represents a summary of comments and key findings from a series of interviews with senior staff at California’s metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). This report was prepared for the California Governor’s Office of Planning and Research for internal education and information gathering purposes.

Key Findings and Takeaways

1. MPOs are not requesting additional authorities or oversight of local land use decisions.
2. MPOs use funding as “carrots” to incentivize local plans to align with regional goals, and many MPOs desire more discretionary funding and priority-specific funding, such as for affordable housing development, pilot projects, and active transportation.
3. Some MPOs want to focus more on greenhouse gas reduction strategies such as telecommuting, active transportation, and technological advancement in order to meet their greenhouse gas emission targets, especially in the context of COVID-19.
4. MPOs want the State to develop policies in ways that acknowledge distinct planning nuances and economic and geographic contexts across the regions.
5. The process of developing and submitting regional plans to the State for review is staff-intensive and technically complex for MPOs. This takes away from the agencies’ capacity to focus on implementation and other important work.
6. Senate Bill 375 has empowered MPOs to consider more deeply the relationship between land use and transportation.
7. As a result of Senate Bill 375, there is now increased communication and engagement between the MPO and a broader set of stakeholders – including local governments, state agencies, the public, and community-based organizations.

Background

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed Senate Bill 375 (SB 375) into law in 2008 with the intent of supporting the State of California's (State) climate goals by focusing on reductions in per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, primarily through reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) as a result of more coordinated land use and transportation planning. This law introduced a new planning requirement and process for metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to achieve these VMT and GHG reduction targets. Under SB 375, each MPO produces a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS), which is incorporated into federally mandated regional transportation plans (RTPs) every four years. Now that 12 years have passed since the initial adoption of SB 375 and MPOs have successfully gone through multiple RTP/SCS planning cycles, there is an opportunity to assess how the law's implementation could be improved in order to achieve State climate and land use goals.

Therefore, in July and August of 2020 a research team of four graduate students from the University of California, Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning, funded by that department as well as a Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) grant from the Institute of Transportation Studies (ITS), conducted interviews with directors and other high-level staff at the State's MPOs for the purpose of gathering information regarding their perspectives on the achievements and challenges associated with the implementation of SB 375. These conversations can be seen as a starting point for state agencies to consider what future policy changes may help these regional agencies more successfully achieve the State's GHG emission reduction goals.

Methodology

Interviews were the primary method of research for this project. The research team sought to interview senior staff including executive directors, planning directors, and SCS planning project leads at all 18 California MPOs, and succeeded in conducting interviews with 17. These included the four largest MPOs (the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Southern California Association of Governments, the San Diego Association of Governments, and the Sacramento Area Council of Governments) as well as most of the smaller MPOs that cover other regions of the state such as the San Joaquin Valley and the Central Coast. Some of these MPOs are Councils of Governments (COGs) and have unique governance structures that reflect that.

Apart from a handful of early interviews with subject matter experts at the University of California, Berkeley for contextual knowledge that informed the interview guide, this research did not incorporate insight from other organizations and individuals about the SCS process, including any local or statewide agencies or advocacy groups.

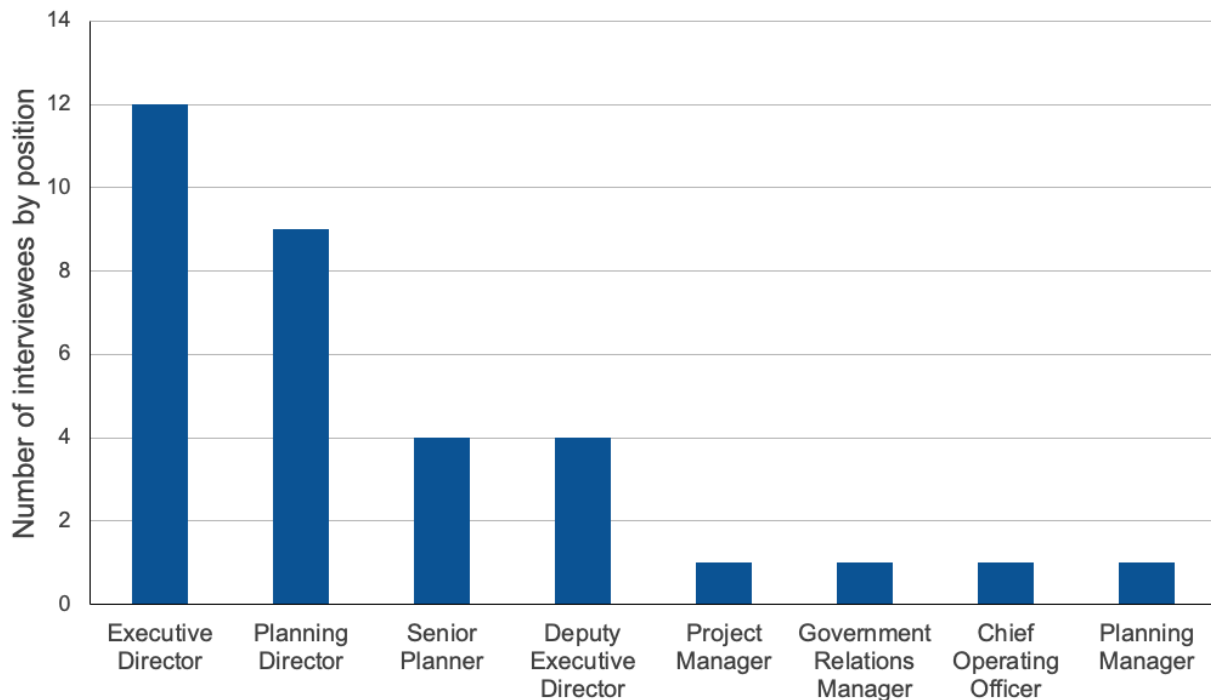


Figure 1. Number of Interviewees by Job Position

Most interviewees were Executive Directors and Planning Directors. All interviewees were MPO staff. N=33

Each MPO participated in one interview. The number of participants at each interview ranged from one to four with a median of two. At least two student researchers attended each interview, with one assigned to leading the interview and the other assigned to note-taking. The interview participants also all provided the student researchers with permission to record the conversation for the purpose of generating a transcript. Both the notes taken during the interview and the audio transcript were used to generate takeaways for each MPO. The questions used to guide these interviews were sent to participants ahead of time and are provided in Appendix B. The interview participants also answered some follow-up questions that were used as needed during the interviews and are also included in Appendix B. The research team assured all interview participants that the confidentiality of their responses would be safeguarded, and so no personally identifiable information is included in any reporting external to the research team.

Descriptive Takeaways

1. MPOs are not requesting additional authorities or control of land use decisions.

- Without additional legal authority, regions want more support from the State to incentivize local governments to meet SCS goals.

In order to bring a region's local governments to the table, MPOs need to strike a sensitive balance between cooperative regional land use and transportation goals while empowering local governments to implement projects that enhance regional sustainability and equity. While local land use authority can result in fragmented land use and transportation decision making processes, an essential understanding is that MPOs do not seek to assume additional responsibility or oversight over local planning. One Central Coast MPO director said that "large scale mass transit is not compatible with our region, so instead we focus on correcting the jobs/housing imbalance and converting short trips to more efficient modes like active transit" - a comment that was expressed by a range of MPOs.

MPOs highlighted how the SCS/RTP process under SB 375 has strengthened and enabled new collaborative and supportive regional relationships between sub-regional agencies and stakeholders. The desired goal of regional governance in most places results in cooperative bottom-up planning and policy-making that fits within the parameters of SB 375. For this arrangement to prove effective, most MPOs articulated a need for more discretionary funding to incentivize land development and non-vehicular transportation projects within the local context. In this political dynamic, some MPOs expressed a desire for the State to take on a more muscular enforcement role, especially in the Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) process – such that the MPOs have more "carrots" and the State has more sticks to direct local governments in the direction of regionally-determined goals.

2. MPOs use funding as "carrots" to incentivize local plans to align with regional goals, and many MPOs desire more discretionary funding and priority-specific funding, such as for affordable housing development, pilot projects, and active transportation.

- Fourteen MPOs would like more funding – discretionary and for pilot projects, multimodal transportation projects, affordable housing, and economic development.
- Ten MPOs said that they plan and implement more active transportation projects now than they did prior to the passage of SB 375.

Among the ten MPOs that attempt to influence local planning decisions to align with regional goals, five cited funding and grants as the primary way they seek out that alignment. Fourteen MPOs would like more State funding to incentivize projects that make progress toward their regional goals. One large MPO said, "We are interested in more discretionary funding that we control like block grant programs. We would be willing to accept additional accountability in order to

access additional funds.” Other MPOs said that they would like more State funding to do or incentivize pilot projects, multimodal transportation projects, affordable infill housing, economic development, and simple solutions that efficiently reduce GHG emissions, like vanpools.

3. Some MPOs want to focus more on greenhouse gas reduction strategies such as telecommuting, active transportation, and technological advancement in order to meet their greenhouse gas emission targets, especially in the context of COVID-19.

- There are concerns with the long-term effectiveness of fixed-route transit due to historically low ridership and the dramatic declines seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Remote work or other ways of reducing office trips may be effective strategies to lower VMT going forward, and the COVID-19 pandemic may illuminate that opportunity.
- There is interest from many MPOs in emphasizing vehicle electrification as a means to reduce GHG emissions relative to VMT.
- Bike and pedestrian projects may be more highly prioritized going forward.

MPOs have indicated concerns that some of their existing strategies employed to limit GHG emissions may ultimately be ineffective. Notably, many agencies highlighted persistent low ridership for public transportation agencies in their regions as a reason to be cautious of utilizing transit as an effective strategy to reduce VMT. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to dramatic declines in transit ridership as well as significant service cuts. Approximately half of agencies expressed concern about the future of transit given these conditions.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased use and acceptance of telecommuting. While remote work was already one of several VMT reduction strategies, in the interviews most MPOs tentatively predicted shifts towards it as a result of the pandemic’s disruptions. Furthermore, some MPOs disputed that the right approach to lowering GHGs would be by limiting VMT growth, which many see as linked to their economic growth and activity. Instead, many small MPOs advocated that the electrification of vehicles be more highly prioritized, thereby weakening the existing link between VMT and GHGs. As an example, one interview participant from a San Joaquin Valley MPO commented, “You shouldn’t care about how much people are driving if they’re driving zero emission vehicles.” This shift in approach, however, would likely not meet the letter or spirit of SB 375. Smaller MPOs, especially those in the Central Valley, have also broadly pointed to investments in bike and pedestrian projects as an area in which to “double-down” during and after COVID-19.

4. MPOs want the State to develop policies in ways that acknowledge distinct planning nuances and economic and geographic contexts across the regions.

- Smaller regions feel that they are not competitive for transportation funding.

- MPOs want State policy to consider contextual differences and resolve differences in priority between state agencies.

Regional and sub-regional politics, economies, and capacities vary significantly across the state, and MPOs were quick to point out regional differences. MPO leaders and planners called on the State to develop more understanding of regional planning nuances in the SCS review process. While this reflects the disparate technical capacities of different regions, it also acknowledges that MPOs and their regions have different starting points, barriers, and resources, even if some of their experiences or perspectives have commonalities.

Most MPOs expressed in the interviews that they want the State to move away from what they described as “one size fits all” policies. For example, six MPOs wanted the California Air Resources Board (CARB) to do more to take underlying differences between regions into account in setting targets and prioritizing regions for evaluation. One planning director from the San Joaquin Valley described a scenario in which the region’s major population center has a General Plan that aligns with the SCS goals, but that the local/regional economy does not provide the market demand (i.e. jobs and incomes) required to facilitate the new transit-oriented infill development that would help support SCS goals. Meanwhile, larger and more urban MPOs deal with an inverse scenario in which the cost of building affordable infill housing near transit exceeds the public subsidies available for this type of development. A few smaller MPOs also felt that CARB does not adequately account for the significant portion of their emissions that are the result of visitors traveling from other regions. A large MPO planning director expressed that it is “so helpful that Caltrans has set aside funding for the SCSs through a formula,” which has “been helpful for community outreach and engaging communities of concern.” Ultimately, different regions require varying degrees of financial and/or technical support from state agencies, and project type and efficacy may look distinct from region to region.

5. The process of developing and submitting regional plans to the State for review is staff-intensive and technically complex for MPOs. This takes away from the MPOs’ capacity to focus on implementation and other important work.

- Eleven MPOs feel that CARB should conduct faster and more streamlined SCS reviews.
- MPOs find models useful for comparing different scenarios and presenting options to their stakeholders but think that CARB has unrealistic expectations of MPOs’ ability to enact the strategies in the model.
- Eleven MPOs expressed support for lengthening the SCS update cycle from four years to between six to ten years.

All 17 MPOs suggested changes for CARB’s SCS evaluation process. However, there was a range of perspectives on what changes should be made.

Thirteen MPOs expressed frustration with the time, investment, and effort required both to develop the SCS and to receive approval from CARB. One Central Coast MPO said “this extra time [waiting for approval] affects grant applications because some require you to have an approved SCS.” Six MPOs were concerned with the increasing complexity of each cycle and requested a more streamlined review process that would reduce the back-and-forth between the agencies and consider the other timelines and responsibilities that MPOs must meet.

Most MPOs expressed a perception that CARB's modeling expectations are removed from the day-to-day realities of planning and coordinating a comprehensive transportation/land use transformation. Seven MPOs felt that the emphasis on modeling does not reflect what is possible given planning and political limitations. These MPOs advocated for “more humility,” “more flexibility,” and recognition of “exogenous factors that make it difficult for an MPO to reach the target.”

Eight MPOs – four of which represent large urban regions – suggested that CARB should place less emphasis on the modeling details and more on policies, best practices, and/or implementation. Also, four MPOs said that the evaluation process is too much “in the weeds” and one large MPO said “there is so much focus on bean counting versus advancing strategies.” However, one large MPO felt that a “best practices” approach would result in projects being implemented that don’t fit the local context.

Eleven MPOs agreed that extending the SCS update cycle from four years to between six to ten years would allow for more capacity to focus on project implementation and would relieve their staff, board members, and the public from continuous planning fatigue. Seven MPOs suggested aligning the SCS updates with the RHNA cycle that takes place every eight years.

6. Senate Bill 375 has empowered MPOs to consider more deeply the relationship between land use and transportation.

- Land use measures that focus on compact growth, mixed-uses, or transit oriented development are considered especially effective by MPOs at reducing VMT growth.
- However, MPOs broadly emphasize their limited role in affecting land use changes that would support per capita VMT reduction in the region.

SB 375 requires MPOs to consider the impacts of transportation investments on land use patterns and, by extension, VMT. This is a significant change from the past when there was less of a focus on VMT and land use as part of GHG analysis and reductions. SB 375 has thus allowed many MPOs to engage with land use impacts on transportation options and choices directly, often for the first time. In the interviews, MPOs broadly held that land use changes that emphasize compact growth, infill, mixed use development, and development around transit investments are key parts of their GHG reduction strategies, since these measures provide residents with multiple travel options and reduce reliance on driving. There is often regular collaboration between local jurisdictions and the MPO to ensure that local plans support these land use strategies. Nevertheless, MPOs consistently maintained in interviews that they are not responsible for land use changes directly, which often limits their influence in this area.

7. As a result of Senate Bill 375, there is now increased communication and engagement between the MPO and a broader set of stakeholders – including local governments, state agencies, the public, and community-based organizations.

- Regional planning networks are stronger and collaborate more than they did before the passage of SB 375.
- MPOs conduct more public engagement now and bring more stakeholders into the planning process.

The majority of MPOs credit the implementation of SB 375 with increased engagement of a broad set of stakeholders. Partnerships have formed between the regions, local governments, and other groups in an effort to meet the goals of the regions' SCSs. Some MPOs have formed committees made up of their local jurisdictions' planning staff and community-based organizations (CBOs) to familiarize themselves with what is happening at the local level and encourage more conversation between these groups. One smaller MPO expressed the value of their established committee as "a huge game changer to be more in tune with what's happening on the local side", and they said that it is their "proactive way of getting feedback." Another MPO stated that their regular attendance at these types of meetings, which occur year around and between SCS cycles, has resulted in "a lot of good coordination" and "changes reflected in the local agencies' general plans." Greater interregional collaboration throughout the State is also occurring. Many MPOs in the Central Valley and Central Coast appreciate the value in meeting regularly to work together and learn from one another. Some have also joined forces to gain leverage when applying for competitive funding opportunities. The smaller MPOs, particularly in the Central Valley, send comments and feedback to the State to increase their "voice and power."

Requirements in SB 375 have also resulted in improved public participation in regional planning processes. The regions take greater responsibility in community engagement and claim that there has been a wider understanding from the public of the regional planning agencies themselves. A large MPO stated that there has been an increase in the "awareness across stakeholder groups about the role of the RTP in creating the vision for the future, and so it's expanded interest in participation." Many MPOs describe their increased public outreach by the number of workshops and public hearings they host. Some expanded on this to describe the resources they provide to increase the number of participants they interact with at these meetings, such as translation services, food, and childcare. They also work with CBOs to engage with communities that are more difficult to reach in an effort to meet environmental justice goals.

Appendix

- A. MPOs Interviewed
- B. Interview Questions

Appendix A: List of Metropolitan Planning Organizations Interviewed

- Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG)
- Butte County Association of Governments (BCAG)
- Fresno Council of Governments (FresnoCOG)
- Kern Council of Governments (KCOG)
- Madera County Transportation Commission (Madera CTC)
- Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG)
- Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)
- Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG)
- San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)
- San Joaquin Council of Governments (SJCOG)
- San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG)
- Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG)
- Shasta County Regional Transportation Planning Agency (SCRTPA)
- Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG)
- Stanislaus Council of Governments (StanCOG)
- Tahoe Metropolitan Planning Organization (TMPO)
- Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Questions asked in every interview:

1. What are one or two successes that your region has had in implementing the SCS/RTP and SB 375?
2. How has your RTP changed since the requirement to include an SCS?
3. What are some measures that have been and would be effective at reducing VMT and per capita GHG in your region?
4. How could the California Air Resources Board (CARB) evaluation process change in order to improve planning and implementation of the SCS/RTP?
5. What other actions could the State undertake to better support the implementation of SCSs to achieve regional goals and state targets?
6. How do you currently work to ensure alignment or consistency between your SCS and other local land use plans/projects and funding measures? What more could you do to strengthen that alignment?

7. With respect to achieving your region's SCS goals, there have been many impacts from COVID. In light of the crisis, how are you maintaining or reconsidering any of your longer-term strategies, particularly in transportation?

Follow-up Questions (This is an incomplete list; These questions were not asked during every interview):

1. What are some changes you've seen in local communities, regional travel behavior, and/or development patterns in part resulting from your SCS/RTP?
2. How is the SCS/RTP used by local governments?
3. To what extent are your SCS/RTP's goals incorporated into local land use and development plans?
4. What carrots and sticks has your MPO used to incentivize local governments? How successful have they been?
5. What changes have local governments made in land use and transportation plans since the SCS process began?
6. Would it be beneficial for there to be a requirement for local plans/projects to be consistent with the SCS/RTP?
7. How have investments in transportation changed as a result of the SCS planning process?
8. In your region, how do you use local governments' general plans, a regional blueprint, and/or other regional forecasts to inform your transportation network?
9. What is the role of the SCS/RTP in shaping growth patterns and transportation investments?
10. What are one or two ways state agencies (i.e. CARB, HCD, SGC) could better align their funding structure with regional planning goals?
11. How could changes in the frequency and timing of SCS updates increase your capacity to implement your regional goals?
12. Can you describe the experience of meeting state-identified greenhouse gas emission targets?
13. What types of data assistance would make it easier to comply with requirements and meet targets?
14. If you had the authority to determine consistency of local plans and funding measures with the SCS, how would that impact your ability to achieve your region's development goals?
15. What additional authorities or powers would be most useful to your MPO in achieving the land use and transportation goals in your SCS/RTP?
16. What potential challenges can you foresee with a delegation of more power to MPOs over local transportation and land use projects?