



San Diego: drink it in!

This past Friday, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) approved the very first [Sustainable Communities Strategy](#) in the state as part of its regional transportation plan. The strategy document is the critical planning piece mandated by California's anti-sprawl law, SB 375. As I [discussed](#) over the summer, SANDAG's plan meets its greenhouse gas reduction goals largely through congestion management and decreased ridership from the down economy. It does not fundamentally alter land use patterns, which are the province of local governments. As a result, progress on reducing per capita greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled actually backslides by 2035 and 2050 — hardly the long-term game-changer we need. The California Attorney General has already weighed in with some [harsh comments](#), and we can expect a lawsuit any day now from environmental groups.

There is reason to expect that the SANDAG plan can be improved, either through lawsuits this round or in future planning efforts. But the legislative language of SB 375, coupled with the political realities of trying to empower regional entities to influence local land use decisions, means that SB 375 is unlikely to make a big impact on land use and transportation anytime soon. SANDAG was the first out of the gate, but other regional entities around the state are likely to suffer the same fate with their plans.

The question this process should raise for smart growth advocates is whether the money and time invested in SB 375 implementation represents the most effective use of limited resources. Certainly the regional framework that SB 375 provides is important, but regional entities in California (like SANDAG) have no authority or influence over local land use patterns. Indeed, the governing boards are comprised of local elected officials who generally resist having a regional body tell them what to do on land use. The main hope is that the SB 375 planning process will build local support for sustainable development patterns. That remains a big "if" though, particularly in less progressive parts of the state like northern San Diego County.

SB 375 has also stimulated investment in transportation modeling, to the tune of \$10 million in California. These models may be useful in a number of planning contexts. But could that money have been spent more efficiently? What if California had dedicated \$10 million to bolstering local planning efforts for sustainable development in the state's critical growth areas? Planning departments have been decimated by the real estate downturn, and yet smart local planning for sustainable development is one of the most promising tools to meet the goals SB 375 was designed to achieve.

Similarly, what if the philanthropic dollars and regional resources invested in this process instead went to local planning efforts and to build support for reinventing redevelopment for transit-oriented neighborhoods? What if these resources instead empowered a small coalition of infill builders, such as the [California Infill Builders Association](#), to make the case to local governments throughout the state to redo their local plans and build support for sustainable development?

With limited money and time for smart growth policies in the state, advocates must ensure that their efforts will result in the biggest bang for the buck. SB 375 may lead to some positive outcomes, but at what cost?