

1 INTRODUCTION

This Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been prepared by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code [PRC] Section 21000 et seq.), and the CEQA Guidelines (14 California Code of Regulations, Sections 15000 et seq.). This EIR evaluates environmental impacts that would occur if San Diego Forward: The Regional Plan (“the proposed Plan”) was adopted and implemented.

The proposed Plan is an update of the 2015 Regional Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy for the San Diego Region and the 2019 Federal Regional Transportation Plan.

SANDAG is a regional planning agency and Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) composed of 18 cities and the county government within the San Diego region. SANDAG must prepare a Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) every 4 years (Government Code Section 65080 et seq.; 23 United States Code Section 134). The RTP must include a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) consisting of land use, housing, and transportation strategies that, if implemented, would allow the region to meet its regional targets for greenhouse gas emissions reductions from passenger vehicle use established by the California Air Resources Board (Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008, Senate Bill 375, Chapter 728, Statutes of 2008).

The proposed Plan, described in detail in Chapter 2, *Project Description*, of this EIR, integrates land use, transportation systems, infrastructure needs, and public investment strategies within a regional framework intended to preserve and improve quality of life, maximize mobility and transportation choices, and conserve and protect natural resources. It meets the requirements of federal and State transportation planning law, and also meets the requirements for the Regional Comprehensive Plan for the San Diego Region established by State law (Assembly Bill 361, Chapter 508, Statutes of 2003).

1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS EIR

The purpose of an EIR, is “to identify the significant effects on the environment of a project, to identify alternatives to the project, and to indicate the manner in which those significant effects can be mitigated or avoided” (PRC Section 21002.1[a]). This EIR analyzes the significant environmental effects of the proposed Plan, identifies feasible mitigation measures to avoid or reduce these impacts, and presents alternatives to the proposed Plan that could avoid or reduce significant impacts. This EIR was prepared to disclose this information to decision makers, members of the public, and public agencies, so that decision makers can make informed decisions about the proposed Plan.

This EIR does not recommend to decision makers whether the proposed Plan should be approved. CEQA requires that decision makers make informed decisions on a project, considering the information presented in the EIR. CEQA allows for the proposed Plan to be approved even if there are significant and unavoidable environmental impacts. This can occur if decision makers find that social, economic, or other benefits outweigh the unavoidable significant impacts. In such a case, a “statement of overriding considerations” would be adopted, stating the specific reasons for approving the project, based on information contained in the EIR and other information in the record (CEQA Guidelines Section 15093).

1.2 SCOPE OF THIS EIR

This EIR for the proposed Plan is a Program EIR, which CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(a) defines as an EIR that may be prepared on a series of actions that can be characterized as one large project and are related: (1) geographically; (2) as logical parts in the chain of contemplated actions; (3) in connection with the issuance of rules, regulations, plans, or other general criteria to govern the conduct of a continuing program; or (4) as individual activities carried out under the same authorizing statutory or regulatory authority and having generally similar environmental impacts that can be mitigated in similar ways.

A Program EIR can provide a comprehensive environmental review for a program of related projects, such as the proposed Plan, that are to be developed over a long period of time. This allows lead agencies to consider program-wide alternatives and cumulative impacts consistently and avoids unnecessary repetition of analysis in subsequent project-specific reviews (see CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(b)).

The degree of specificity in an EIR corresponds to the degree of specificity of the underlying activity being evaluated (CEQA Guidelines Section 15146). This EIR analyzes impacts of the proposed Plan at the same level of detail as the proposed Plan. This EIR provides a foundation for second-tier CEQA documents for subsequent projects, but does not analyze the project-specific impacts of individual projects. Project-specific and site-specific details of subsequent transportation and land use projects will vary widely. When a first-tier Program EIR is prepared, “leaving project-specific details to subsequent EIRs when specific projects are considered” is a proper approach to CEQA tiering (*In re Bay Delta* [2008] 43 Cal. 4th 1143, 1174).

Mitigation measures listed in the EIR are subject to the same rules of specificity and level of detail as the impact analysis. With a Program EIR, detailed project-specific mitigation measures are properly deferred to future project-specific CEQA review (see, e.g., *Koster v. County of San Joaquin* (1996) 47 Cal. App. 4th 29 and CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(b)(4)).

The project-specific impacts and mitigation measures for individual projects will be addressed in future environmental reviews, carried out by the appropriate lead agency in accordance with State and federal law. For a description of the intended uses of this EIR, refer to Chapter 2, Section 2.6. For a detailed discussion of the content and approach to the analysis in this EIR, please see Chapter 4, *Environmental Impact Analysis*. The following 19 resource areas are analyzed in this EIR.

- Aesthetics and Visual Resources
- Agricultural and Forestry Resources
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Energy
- Geology, Soils, and Paleontological Resources
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Land Use
- Mineral Resources
- Noise and Vibration
- Population and Housing
- Public Services and Utilities
- Transportation
- Tribal Cultural Resources
- Water Supply
- Wildfire

1.3 ORGANIZATION OF THIS EIR

This EIR begins with an Executive Summary, which is a condensed version of the EIR identifying the proposed Plan's significant impacts, mitigation measures, and alternatives that would reduce or avoid those impacts; known areas of controversy and issues to be resolved; and how to mitigate significant impacts. Chapter 1 is this *Introduction*.

Chapter 2, *Project Description*, describes the varied aspects of the proposed Plan in sufficient detail to support the impact analysis. The general physical characteristics of the natural and built environments of the San Diego region are described in Chapter 3, *Environmental Setting*. Chapter 4 provides the impact analysis, beginning with a detailed explanation of the approach for the analysis, followed by analysis for 19 different resource areas in Sections 4.1 through 4.19. Each resource area section describes existing conditions (which serve as the baseline for impact analysis), regulatory setting, significance criteria, impact analysis, and mitigation measures (where significant impacts are identified). Section 4.20 summarizes the impacts of the proposed Plan in 2025, 2035, and 2050. Chapter 5 contains the cumulative impacts analysis, while the alternatives to the proposed Plan are discussed and evaluated in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 includes other considerations required by CEQA, including growth inducement, a maximum theoretical build-out scenario, and significant irreversible impacts. Chapter 8 provides the references consulted in preparing this EIR, and Chapter 9 lists the preparers of this environmental document.

This Final EIR reproduces the text of the Draft EIR, and shows changes to the text of the Draft EIR in underline and strikeout format. These changes mainly were made in response to public comments on the Draft EIR, but also include staff-initiated technical corrections and clarifications.

Appendices include the Notice of Preparation (NOP) and written comments received during the NOP period and scoping meeting (Appendix A), as well as technical documents (Appendices B through O) that provide supporting data and information for this EIR. Appendix P, *Response to Comments*, reproduces the comments received on the Draft EIR, and presents the responses to those comments. Appendices A–O are combined and bound together in a document separate from this Final EIR. Due to its size, Appendix P is bound separately.

In compliance with PRC Section 21081.6, a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) will be prepared as a separate document that will be considered after certification of the Final EIR, when the SANDAG Board of Directors considers whether to adopt the proposed Plan.

1.4 LEAD AND RESPONSIBLE AGENCIES

A lead agency is the public agency that has the principal responsibility for carrying out or approving a project (CEQA Guidelines Section 15367). Responsible agencies are other public agencies that propose to carry out or approve a project for which a lead agency is preparing an EIR, including all other agencies that have discretionary approval for a project (CEQA Guidelines Section 15381).

In the case of the proposed Plan and this EIR, SANDAG serves as the lead agency because it is required by federal and State law to prepare and adopt the proposed Plan. No responsible agencies for this EIR have been identified.

1.5 PUBLIC REVIEW AND PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Consistent with CEQA, SANDAG contacted affected agencies, organizations, and individuals who may have an interest in the proposed Plan and EIR. This consultation assisted in defining the scope of this EIR, which is described in Section 1.2.

1.5.1 NOTICE OF PREPARATION

SANDAG initiated the EIR scoping process on November 14, 2016, through the circulation of a NOP. Receipt of the NOP by the State Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse) at the California Office of Planning and Research on November 14, 2016, initiated a 60-day comment period that ended January 13, 2017.

The NOP provided formal notification to all federal, State, and local agencies involved with funding, and to other interested organizations and members of the public, that an EIR will be prepared for the proposed Plan. The NOP was intended to encourage interagency communication concerning the proposed Plan and provide sufficient background information so that agencies, organizations, and individuals could respond to SANDAG with specific comments and questions on the scope and content of this EIR. Appendix A summarizes the issues raised in the NOP comments and identifies the EIR section(s) that address that issue or provides another response to the issue raised as appropriate. The NOP is provided in full in Appendix A-1. The written comments are provided in full in Appendix A-2.

1.5.2 PUBLIC SCOPING

Consistent with CEQA (PRC Section 21083.9), SANDAG noticed and held a public scoping meeting on December 8, 2016, at SANDAG's office at 401 B Street, San Diego, CA 92101. The purpose was to receive perspective and input from agencies, organizations, and individuals on the scope and content of the environmental information to be addressed in the EIR.

1.5.3 COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT EIR

The Draft EIR for the proposed Plan was released to the public on August 27, 2021, and ~~was~~ will be available for a 45-day public review period, as required by CEQA. The public review period ~~ended will end on~~ October 11, 2021. SANDAG published a Notice of Availability (NOA) for the Draft EIR in local newspapers on August 27, 2021, and mailed the NOA to an extensive distribution list. SANDAG also filed a Notice of Completion (NOC) with the State Clearinghouse to indicate the availability of the Draft EIR for public review and comment on August 27, 2021. In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15204, reviewers ~~should~~ were asked to "focus on the sufficiency of the document in identifying and analyzing the possible impacts on the environment and ways in which the significant effects of the project might be avoided or mitigated."

The Draft EIR and all appendices ~~are~~ were available for review online at www.sdforward.com and at SANDAG offices located at 401 B Street, Suite 800, San Diego, California 92101. The Draft EIR ~~was~~ has been distributed to the agencies, organizations, and individuals that provided written comments on the NOP, the SANDAG Board of Directors, SANDAG member agencies, ~~public libraries throughout the region,~~ the San Diego Central Library (which was capable of transferring the document to other local libraires), and other interested parties and stakeholders.

Agencies, organizations, and individuals ~~were~~ are invited to provide written comments on the Draft EIR during the public review period from August 27 to October 11, 2021. Comments ~~were~~ asked to ~~should~~ be emailed with

subject line “Regional Plan EIR” to: RegionalPlanEIR@sandag.org. Written comments ~~were asked to~~ be addressed and sent ~~to~~:

San Diego Regional Plan EIR
C/O Kirsten Uchitel, Associate Planner
401 B Street, Suite 800
San Diego, CA 92101

Comments ~~could~~ also be submitted using a comment form at: www.sandag.org/RegionalPlanEIRComments.

Following the public review period, SANDAG ~~will~~ prepared written responses to significant environmental concerns raised in comments on the Draft EIR. The Final EIR ~~will~~ includes revisions to the Draft EIR, comments received on the Draft EIR either verbatim or in summary, and SANDAG responses to significant environmental concerns raised in the public comments. Appendix P contains comments received on the Draft EIR and responses to those comments. The Final EIR and all appendices are available for review online at www.sdforward.com and at SANDAG offices located at 401 B Street, Suite 800, San Diego, California 92101. Certification of the Final EIR and adoption of the proposed Plan are anticipated to be considered by the SANDAG Board of Directors on December 10, 2021.

