

OneBayArea

Sustainable Communities Strategy

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Sustainable Communities Strategy?

The Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) is an integrated land use and transportation plan that all metropolitan regions in California must complete under Senate Bill 375. In the San Francisco Bay Area this integration includes ABAG's Projections and Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) and MTC's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP).

What will the SCS do?

State law requires that the SCS accomplish three principal objectives:

1. Identify areas to accommodate all the region's population associated with Bay Area economic growth, including all income groups, for at least the next twenty-five years;
2. Develop a Regional Transportation Plan that meets the needs of the region; and
3. Reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from automobiles and light trucks.

In responding to these three state mandates, the SCS will also need to be responsive to a host of other regional and local quality-of-life concerns.

What size of population will the SCS need to accommodate?

The Bay Area currently has 7.3 million people. Over the next twenty-five years it is expected to grow by about another two million; this additional growth is equivalent to approximately five times the current population of the City of Oakland.

What are the greenhouse-gas reduction targets?

On August 9, 2010, the California Air Resources Board (ARB) staff proposed a seven percent reduction target for 2020 and a fifteen percent reduction target for 2035 for the Bay Area. These targets are based on per capita greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles relative to 2005. Final greenhouse gas (GHG) targets will be adopted by ARB on September 23, 2010.

Who will prepare the SCS?

Within the Bay Area, the law gives joint responsibility for the SCS to the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). The two agencies will work with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District

(the Air District) and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). They will also partner with local governments, county congestion management agencies and a wide range of stakeholders to ensure broad public input in the SCS's preparation.

How will the SCS affect local land-use control?

SB 375 does not alter the authority of city and county governments to make decisions about local land use and development. However, the law does require that the SCS be consistent with the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) and therefore affects the next iteration of housing elements in local general plans.

How does the SCS relate to the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and RHNA?

Regional Transportation Plans include land use projections. The SCS will be the land use allocation in the next RTP, slated for adoption in March 2013. SB 375 stipulates that the SCS will incorporate an 8-year housing projection and allocation pursuant to RHNA.

Aside from the RHNA requirement, why would local governments want to conform to the SCS?

1. To benefit from incentives that will be available to conforming localities—for example, Transportation for Livable Communities (TLC) funding, Station Area Planning Grants, investments from the Regional Transportation Plan, and assistance in meeting the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA);
2. To improve the quality of life of our neighborhoods by providing cleaner air, improved public health, better mobility, more walkable streets, and homes closer to transit, jobs, and services.

Why the emphasis on automobiles and light trucks?

Transportation is the largest single source of greenhouse gases in California. In the Bay Area, it accounts for 41 percent of our emissions, and over three quarters of these come from personal travel in on-road vehicles. If we are to significantly reduce our contribution to global warming, then we need to reduce the impact of our travel within the region. The SCS aims to reduce emissions by:

- Reducing the separation of land uses (jobs, stores, schools, and homes) and encouraging more complete, mixed-use communities, so people can drive less and increase their walking, biking, and use of transit;
- Clustering more homes, jobs and other activities around transit, so people will be encouraged to take transit rather than drive; and
- Planning land uses and transportation together, so we can manage traffic congestion and vehicle speeds, reducing emissions from excessive idling and other inefficiencies.

Land use development changes very slowly and many places will not change much. How much difference can the SCS really make?

We acknowledge that it will likely be decades before changes in the land use pattern make an appreciable difference to the total emissions from personal vehicles. Improvements in vehicle technology and transportation pricing mechanisms (e.g., parking) are likely to have a greater impact, both in the short and longer term. However, the impact of more efficient vehicles could be significantly reduced if the amount we drive and congestion continue to increase because of inefficient land uses. There is a broad consensus that there isn't just one thing that we should do; we will need to move on all fronts. Changes in technology will have to be accompanied by changes in travel behavior if we have any hope of reducing emissions to the levels required by the middle of this century. If we are to be successful in reconfiguring the region by 2050 or so, we need to start now.

While we implement the long-term land-use changes, is there anything we can do that will have more immediate impact?

Yes. The state law which requires a SCS allows us to use transportation measures and policies. These might include road pricing (new and increased tolls), parking regulations, and incentives to accelerate the adoption of alternative vehicles like electric cars, among others.

The extraordinarily high gas prices in 2008 demonstrated that an increase in the cost of driving had an immediate effect on travel patterns: fewer people drove, while more took transit. However, while transportation pricing policies could be powerful and fast-acting measures, the impact on people's pocketbooks will be politically contentious and difficult to implement. In addition, the equity consequences could be particularly challenging: we do not want to make life more unaffordable for those who are already struggling. If we increase the costs of driving, we need to supply land use and transportation choices so people have a genuine ability to avoid or mitigate those costs.

What are some of the other regional efforts related to the SCS?

The Air District and BCDC are developing policies and regulations that will affect the region's land use pattern and placement of public infrastructure, including transportation.

In its effort to control local and regional air pollution (smog, particulate matter, and airborne toxins), the Air District is considering an indirect source rule (ISR) that regulates the construction and long-term transportation impacts of land development. The ISR may require mitigation or payments in lieu of development that increases automobile travel and vehicle emissions. The Air District also recently adopted new thresholds for the evaluation of development projects under CEQA.

BCDC will be releasing an adaptation plan to prepare for inevitable sea-level rise and storm surges affecting areas on and near the Bay shoreline. This will have implications for the location of future development and perhaps for the relocation of existing development and infrastructure. The SCS needs to consider this adaptation work.

What if the SCS is not able to meet its targets?

If we cannot meet the greenhouse-gas reduction targets in the SCS, then we must prepare an Alternative Planning Strategy (APS) to accompany the SCS. The APS will be structured like the SCS, but it is an unconstrained plan that does not have to be as feasible or achievable as the SCS, since it would not be adopted as part of the RTP. The APS would identify the physical, economic, or political conditions required to meet the regional greenhouse gas targets. The APS may provide some CEQA streamlining to housing or mixed-use development projects which are consistent with certain aspects of its land use pattern.

What type of CEQA assistance might be provided through the SCS or APS?

The CEQA relief to be provided through the SCS or APS could include the following:

1. Residential or mixed use projects that comply with the general use designation, density, building intensity and other policies specified for the project area in the SCS will not be required to deal with growth-inducing impacts or transportation-related project-specific or cumulative impacts on global warming or on the regional transportation network required by CEQA.
2. Transit priority projects, which meet a number of land use, density and location criteria as well as including high-quality transit might be totally exempt from CEQA or might qualify for a streamlined review called a sustainable communities environmental assessment.

The SCS sounds like a big project. Are we starting from scratch?

Thankfully, we are not. For over a decade, the Bay Area has been encouraging more focused and compact growth to help revitalize older communities, develop complete communities, reduce travel time and expense, make better use of the existing transportation system, control the costs of providing new infrastructure, protect resource land and environmental assets, promote affordability, and generally improve the quality of life for all Bay Area residents. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions just provides another reason to continue and accelerate these ongoing efforts.

Responding to the regional agencies' FOCUS program, over sixty local governments have voluntarily designated over 120 Priority Development Areas (PDAs). Located within existing urbanized areas and served by high-quality public transit, PDAs consume only about three percent of the region's land area but are being planned by their local jurisdictions to house nearly one-half of the region's projected population growth to the year 2035. FOCUS PDAs and associated incentive programs like TLC – which has reached its 10-year anniversary – provide a solid foundation upon which to build the SCS.

How much time do we have to complete the Sustainable Communities Strategy?

According to the State, the Bay Area's SCS is due in March 2013. However, a draft SCS needs to be completed by the beginning of 2012 so it can guide the investments in the transportation plan, to ensure consistency with the eight-year RHNA, and make sure that environmental impact documents are completed in time to allow sufficient public review. We will receive our final greenhouse-gas targets from the California Air Resources Board in September 2010. That leaves less than a year and a half to work with all our partners to actually produce the SCS.

Over the next few months, we will build the necessary analytic tools, strengthen partnerships with local governments and other stakeholders, and work out the information and engagement mechanisms to make the process transparent and worthy of public support.

Who should we contact with questions?

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