

SANDAG

An Assessment of Its Role in the San Diego Region

Frequently Asked Questions:

Why Did the LAO Study Governance in the San Diego Region?

For over 20 years, San Diego region residents and local officials have debated whether their network of local and regional governmental agencies is well suited to addressing the region's growing challenges. Some previous studies have found shortcomings in the region's "governance system" and recommended changes, including modifications to the region's council of governments (SANDAG). Chapter 743, Statutes of 2002 (SB 1703, Peace) and Chapter 508, Statutes of 2003 (AB 361, Kehoe), directed the LAO to study the San Diego region's governance system and provide options for improving its accountability and effectiveness.

Assessing the Region's Governance System: What Works Well?

Because San Diego local agencies (the county, cities, and special districts) are governed by locally-elected officials, residents can hold their local officials accountable for their actions. In addition, most issues that benefit from region-wide review (such as regional transportation, environmental protection, and comprehensive planning) are assigned to an agency (such as the air district or water quality board) with responsibility for the larger affected area. Finally, SANDAG has responsibility for many transportation and planning duties—a scope of responsibility that is broader than many other councils of governments in the state and allows it to consider a range of objectives in its decision making.

What Shortcomings Did the LAO Find in the Region's Governance System?

The governing boards of most San Diego regional agencies are comprised of appointed representatives, serving at the pleasure of the appointing body. As a result, the public has limited ability to hold these representatives accountable. In addition, individual regional agencies typically (1) have responsibility for a single policy area (such as air quality, water supply, or transportation finance) and (2) have limited regulatory or fiscal authority to make progress regarding their policy area. Most notably, the governance system is not well designed for ensuring that the region's remaining developable land is used in a manner consistent with the region's stated long-term interests. Regional agencies, such as SANDAG, make land use policy recommendations, but local agencies are not bound by these recommendations. Cities and the county face significant economic incentives to orient their land use policies to promote a narrow range of land uses, primarily retail.

What Are the Region's Challenges and What Is SANDAG Doing to Address Them?

The San Diego region faces significant challenges regarding transportation mobility, housing affordability, and environmental protection—concerns similar in nature and scope to other California urban regions. SANDAG works to address these issues by developing a regional comprehensive plan, encouraging local actions to follow its policy suggestions, and financing transportation projects that are consistent with its plan. Virtually all SANDAG plans for about 15 years have encouraged local agencies to use their land use powers to promote “smart growth,” or “compact, efficient, and environmentally sensitive” development that focuses “future growth away from rural areas and closer to existing and planned job centers and public facilities.” While SANDAG’s policy recommendations make sense, we note that SANDAG has no authority over land use and that fiscal and political factors often work contrary to SANDAG’s suggestions. Our review found that local agency land use plans are not well aligned with SANDAG’s policy recommendations.

Should the Region's Governance System Be Changed?

Identifying weaknesses in a governance system is a simpler task than enacting measures to correct them. Enacting changes requires weighing sensitive issues, including: the extent of local versus regional control over land use policy decisions; the desirability of elected versus appointed representatives; the advantages of single purpose government versus general purpose governments, and the advantages of maintaining stability in a governance structure versus the potential for improvement through change. This report explores three approaches: enact no change; incrementally change the responsibilities of various governmental agencies (without significantly modifying the governance structure); and enact broad governance reform. Which is the best approach? There really is no single answer. Any decisions entail sensitive policy tradeoffs and taking actions where the outcomes cannot be fully predicted.