

July 17, 2020

What We Are Learning from COVID-19 and How It Could Impact Transportation Planning in the San Diego Region

Overview

On April 26, 2019, staff introduced the 5 Big Moves as key strategies for developing a transportation system that is equitable and safe, provides convenient and accessible travel choices, and meets state and federal requirements for social equity, climate and air quality, and the environment. Since then, staff has been developing a data-driven vision for the 2021 Regional Plan under the 5 Big Moves framework.

In March 2020, an unprecedented global pandemic forced governments to put in place stay home orders to protect the public and reduce the spread of disease. The abrupt closure of communities has had widespread impacts on the economy and public well-being. Staff from SANDAG, Metropolitan Transit System (MTS), and North County Transit District (NCTD) will share research and data on regional economic and transportation impacts of COVID-19. This presentation aims to inform policymakers on key findings for consideration as we move forward with the development of the 2021 Regional Plan.

Action: **Discussion/Possible Action**

An overview of regional economic and transportation impacts of COVID-19 will be presented.

Fiscal Impact:

N/A

Schedule/Scope Impact:

N/A

Key Considerations

Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19

Impacts of COVID-19 were felt throughout the San Diego region. Tourism, general retail, and food and beverage were among the industries most affected. Taxable retail sales were down approximately 35% in May. With recent analyses by SANDAG staff, COVID-19 has revealed immense disparities across the region with low-income, Black, and Hispanic communities hit the hardest by both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Nearly half of Black (45%) and Hispanic (42%) residents live in ZIP codes that have higher than average COVID-19 cases and higher than average unemployment rates. Black and Hispanic workers also account for a larger portion of essential front-line workers.

Public Transit and Traffic Impacts of COVID-19

COVID-19 drastically changed travel behavior. Public transit ridership dropped sharply reaching its lowest level in April with a 70% reduction in ridership compared to the same period in 2019. Ridership started to recover as stay home orders eased, by the end of May, ridership across all regional bus and rail services was up by 12% from April.

Many low-income and minority commuters continued to depend on public transit as their primary mode of transportation. Twenty percent of those taking public transit to work do not have access to a personal vehicle, they also experience longer commute times. The median travel time to work via transit is 51 minutes, which is roughly double the commute time of those driving to work.

Of the 3,783 residents in the region that responded to a regional travel survey conducted in June 2020, 42% took transit prior to COVID-19 and reported that they will return to transit in the future. Another 18% did not use transit before the pandemic but stated they would be likely to use transit in the future¹.

Freeway traffic levels also fell as a result of the stay home orders. Traffic volumes and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) were at their lowest in April with 50% fewer vehicles on the road than during that same period in 2019. As restrictions started easing, traffic rebounded. By early July, traffic volumes were down by just 18% and VMT down by 22% from the same period in 2019. While personal travel decreased, 78% of residents participating in the regional travel survey indicated that online shopping and home delivery increased.

The reduction in driving led to a marked reduction in emissions from cars and trucks between mid-March and mid-April. According to the California Air Resources Board this translated to improved air quality (reduced ozone or smog, and to a lesser extent particulates). With the reopening of the economy, air pollution has returned to within the levels observed over the last five years.

Telework Trends

Telework and distance learning are reasons for the reduction in travel. Of the residents that responded to the regional travel survey and reported teleworking during the health crisis, 48% expect to continue teleworking at some level in the future.

A survey of 137 employers in the San Diego region was also conducted from March 30, 2020, through June 19, 2020. Just over half of the surveyed employers offered telework (55%), of these employers, 26% stated that they will continue offering telework. When asked what percent of their workforce would be eligible to telework, 7% said their entire workforce. Of those companies who said they would offer telecommuting in the future only 9% said they would offer it full-time.

While telework has the potential to relieve some peak period congestion, roughly 61% of all occupations in the San Diego region are not conducive to working from home. In the region, 64% of occupations are considered essential jobs, and of those essential jobs fewer than 42% are conducive to working from home. Low-income and minority workers are less likely to have the option to work from home. Higher paying jobs in industries like financial and professional services, are most likely to telework.

Telework, distance learning, and virtual healthcare services rely on broadband connectivity and home internet access. COVID-19 shed light on the digital divide in our region with 23% of low-income households not benefitting from a broadband subscription and 20 to 40% of students in many local districts lacking home internet access. Closing the digital divide will be an important aspect of transportation planning to ensure that everyone in the region benefits from improvements to transportation technology and app enabled transportation services.

Active Transportation Trends

Biking and walking increased as a result of the stay home order. Bicycling trips increased on all eight corridors where SANDAG collects bike volume data. Bicycle volumes were at their highest in May with 91% more bikes being counted on these corridors in 2020 than 2019. The regional travel survey also showed an increase in walking and biking; 50% reported walking more and 14% biking more for both recreation, travel to work, and shopping and errands. Of those who walked and biked more during the health crisis, more than four out of five stated they will continue walking (82%) and biking (85%) in the future. To support jurisdictions with providing safe space for walking and biking during the health crisis, SANDAG provided funding and support for 11 jurisdictions to implement Shared Street pilots.

¹ The Regional Travel Survey was sent to nearly 17,000 households that participated in the 2017 San Diego Regional Transportation Survey and agreed to be contacted again. This was not a random sample and the responses shared may not generalize to the population overall. However, the data provides a glimpse into travel choices being made by residents in the region which is important insight as we move forward with our planning for the 2021 Regional Plan.

Next Steps

Staff will continue to monitor and report on the social, economic, and transportation impacts associated with COVID-19. These findings are informing the 2021 Regional Plan vision which seeks to meet regulatory requirements and create equal access to jobs, education, healthcare, and other community resources. The 2021 Regional Plan vision is expected to be presented to the Transportation, Regional Planning, and Borders Committees on August 7, 2020, and to the Board of Directors on August 14, 2020.

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