

# Summary Report: Regional Dialogue on Connect SoCal and COVID-19

## Overview:

On June 24, 2020 the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) held a virtual town hall to learn the specific impacts of COVID-19 in communities across the region and to hear from stakeholders about how Connect SoCal implementation, through the planning resources, research and convening functions of SCAG can help assist in moving the region forward. The event featured a keynote address from SCAG's President Rex Richardson and a presentation from SCAG's Director of Planning, Sarah Jepson. After the formal presentations, attendees gathered in several smaller breakout rooms to discuss two separate topics. The first breakout discussion topic was "How has COVID-19 impacted your community?" and the second breakout discussion focused on the question of "How can Connect SoCal be a tool for recovery?"

Participants in SCAG's breakout discussions included representatives and residents from across the region and from each county that SCAG represents. Individuals included elected officials, staff from local jurisdictions and transportation agencies, as well as representatives from non-profit and business organizations. In total there were over 80 participants in the breakout discussions.

The summaries below reflect the issues raised and ideas offered during those two discussions, organized by the prevailing themes. This input has been summarized as received and does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of SCAG.

## Discussion 1: How has COVID-19 impacted your community?

During the first break-out discussion, participants shared details and examples of how their community has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns about the economy and the unequal impact of the pandemic predominated the conversations but participants also shared other reflections related to transportation, housing, and examples of the responsive actions local governments are taking to serve their residents.

### Economy

Many communities across the region are struggling economically. Top economic concerns are the high rates of unemployment, decline of local revenues and permanent business closures.

Specific comments included:

#### **Industries most impacted include hospitality, retail and logistics**

- Beach communities and other communities reliant on tourism and conferences have seen decline in business.
- Hotels shut downs impacted cities dependent on transient occupancy tax, though recently seeing a slight increase.
- The Los Angeles Airport has seen the repercussion on the travel bans, including a complete reduction of air service and drastic reduction of number of flights. They are working on ways to help make people feel safe to fly again, such as programs and cleaning protocols.

- Logistics and manufacturing sector has also faced large staff layoffs.

#### **Decline in sales taxes leading to reduced municipal services**

- For example, reduced service by libraries and unfilled positions in the police departments.
- Gaps in service and funding has had an impact on the community.
- City employees have reduced hours or have been furloughed.
- There seems to be no safety net for cities.
- Imperial County cannot meet Governor's guidelines due to lack of resources so they cannot begin to recover/open up to get life back to normal.
- Also, communication with government agencies has been difficult as public forums may be less interactive and the location of resources is not clear.

#### **Local business and the greater economy have been severely impacted.**

- Many small businesses have closed and may never return. Others may not be able to recover from these economic losses. This is leading to vacancies, especially in strip retail centers.
- Businesses need support for their leases and operating costs which the cities may not be able to provide as they lack the financial resources too.
- Businesses, like cities, are facing declining revenues but increased cost of doing business.
- Closed businesses will effect entire community.
- School closures impact workforce being able to return to work and has been a challenge for essential workers.
- Across the region, there are geographic differences in the percent of workforce able to telework. For example, in Orange County, there is more teleworking in south Orange County whereas in central and north Orange County the economy relies on Disney and face-to-face business.
- Each industry and each city/county has been affected differently but everyone's reaction is the same: we're trying to survive.

#### **Is Teleworking the "new normal"?**

- Community Management industry (e.g. HOA's) are setting up for permanent telework.
- Inequality: those who don't have access to internet or technology are hit the hardest, the digital divide is getting wider and not everyone can telework.
- LADOT surveyed 600 employees & separately surveyed supervisors. 90% of supervisors say their teams are as productive if not more since we started remote work in March.
- City of La Habra Heights Starting limited in-person appointments but most staff working remotely.

## Public Health

Several commenters noted the specific health related impacts to their communities.

Specific comments included:

### **Mental health concerns**

- For seniors, activities have been disrupted (i.e. socializing, going for walks, grocery shopping) resulting in feelings of depression.
- For teleworking parents, lack of accessibility to schools affects parents and teachers.
- Uncertainty about how long we have to live this way or when we will get a vaccine.

### **Uneven compliance and communication issues with public health guidance around mask wearing and social distancing**

- Compliance with social distancing and mask wearing is problematic in many communities.
- At the time of the town hall, Glendale was fourth in the county for number of cases. The city implemented early mask mandate but residents don't seem to follow city guidelines.
- In Orange County, observations noted that majority of people are wearing masks
- Communication problems included confusion about differing guidelines and which to follow.

### **Blood supplies low**

- Partnering with the hospital and red cross to run drives- allows for testing of antibodies which can motivate donations

## Transportation

Specific comments included:

### **Most areas saw an initial dip in traffic and congestion but it is starting to rise again.**

- In Ventura County, traffic now was down by 40% compared to a year ago, but the uptick started in May.
- Schools being out reduced traffic on residential streets.
- Affluent neighborhoods are seeing the highest drop in trips and VMT, likely because those residents are able to work from home.

### **Changing travel behavior**

- People are driving faster.
- More traffic on weekend in Costa Mesa because of people going to the beach.

- We are seeing higher VMT and more trips in our lower-income neighborhoods.
- Increase in the number of people walking and biking in the community. .
- More goods movement (UPS/Amazon/USPS) on local roads as people shift to online shopping.

### **Transit ridership is down**

- Some transit agencies have reduced services or routes.
- Concerns about how to ensure people feel safe riding transit with cleanliness procedures and service is available for essential workforce riders.
- Challenges with transit and shared services, such as shuttle service in the City of Mission Viejo that was shut down due to pandemic, and decreased accessibility.
- San Clemente is struggling to start community trolley, no concerned about COVID impacts and funding availability.

### **Changes in active transportation and need for open space**

- Glendale instituted slow streets to address transportation safety and received requests from 500+ residents for their areas to encourage traffic to slow down.
- Trails and open space are experiencing increased walkers and cyclists from local residents and neighboring areas.
- Sidewalks are not wide enough in many communities and residents feel that the cities aren't moving quickly enough to address safety for walking and biking.
- The County of Ventura is receiving more demand for active transportation and new routes.
- Communities are experiencing the lack of open space and park space, and seeing inequities in availability of active transportation and dedicated lanes.
- The pandemic has exposed how essential the park infrastructure is and there has been more frequent use of parks in the community. Participants noted the need to reprioritize the open space infrastructure.

## **Community, Housing, and Socioeconomic Disparities**

Specific comments included:

### **COVID-19 is revealing and exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities in the region**

- The digital divide has increased for those working and studying at home.
- In Santa Ana, lower income areas without access to Wi-Fi may have significant impact on how they were learning and accessing zoom.
- Data shows that not only does the pandemic reveal health inequities, we are seeing transportation inequities too.

- Higher income employees are more likely to be able to work from home compared to lower wage employees in essential jobs such as grocery.
- Air pollution is even more concerning now given its link to spreading or making people more susceptible to negative health outcomes from COVID-19.
- The city of Long Beach saw differences in virus spread between west and east side of the city with minority communities seeing increased impacts.
- What populations are being affected by reduced government or transit services?
- Food insecurity is high.
- Immigrant community impacted severely in Ventura County.

**COVID-19 is impacting housing security and leading to concern about future evictions and displacement.**

- Housing insecurity continues to rise during COVID-19, especially since it was already difficult for some low-income residents to pay rent and now there is widespread job loss.
- Concerns about repeating Great Recession trends of declining homeownership and increase in investor owned properties
- City of Los Angeles is concerned that loss of jobs and potential evictions will lead to faster gentrification of transit-dependent neighborhoods.
- Cost of housing has not gone down, despite low vacancy rates, and this is a barrier for home ownership and renting.
- Increased homelessness.

[Response by Local Jurisdictions](#)

Local jurisdictions have had to adapt and step into new roles to be responsive to the needs of their residents. Some of the new efforts or policies by cities in the region include:

**Allowing more creative use of streets and public spaces**

- City of San Clemente is offering outdoor seating opportunities for restaurants, and outdoor sales opportunities for retail establishments
- Costa Mesa started a pilot program for identifying parklet and public right-of-way outdoor dining. The city has also addressed increased roadway speeds and implemented no-touch walkway buttons. For businesses, the city authorized drive-thus in parking lots for businesses to do curb-side pickup.
- Long Beach put forward an initiative for Open Streets.
- City of San Dimas has an application process for businesses to come out onto downtown sidewalks.
- City of Ventura closed off streets downtown to allow businesses to expand out into street.

### **Providing new resources and services**

- Ventura County set aside \$10 million to provide grants to impacted businesses and renters that are affected during this time.
- Providing support and services to seniors has been an increased focus for jurisdictions:
- City of La Habra Heights created senior care watch list, using city funds going to fund weekly care packages.
- City of San Dimas contracted with a homeless service provider who has been on board with helping our homeless with shelter, food and other services, such as project roomkey. They also started Emergency Rental Assistance and a San Dimas CARES program that provides food and meals to seniors.
- Ventura County Transportation Commission is working with health care services to place people camping on public land into non-congregant housing, which may positively catalyze future strategic work.

### **However, cities are also facing challenges**

- San Clemente has had to shut down recreational facilities, implement online learning with the schools and learn new virtual systems.
- Conflicting discussions amongst city staff and council members makes it hard to come to a consensus for effective policies:
  - One side wants businesses to open up faster to try to get things back to normal but the other side fears opening up too quickly will make the situation worse.
  - Regarding wearing masks: some people feel like it is violating their rights to require everyone to wear masks in public.
- Cities are not prepared to distribute supplies. For example, Los Angeles County is making hurried plans to retool their preparedness for wildfires and public safety power shutoffs. How will a potential evacuation be conducted safely during the pandemic?
- Some cities are seeing a greater reliance on programs that support senior citizen populations, including meals on wheels. With reduced resources, these programs are being impacted.
- Regarding housing planning, how can cities support affordable housing with the massive negative impacts to their budget as a result of the pandemic?

## [Discussion 2: How can Connect SoCal be a tool for recovery?](#)

The second break-out discussion focused on how Connect SoCal could be used as a tool for recovery and more broadly how SCAG could be supportive to the region going forward. This included ideas for how SCAG can assist with research, planning resources and through SCAG's role as a convener of policy makers across the region.

## Research and Information

Participants had many ideas about what information is needed at this time and suggested several areas for SCAG to research to provide insights for the region. This included:

- Research pandemic impacts to behaviors in transportation, commercial spending, housing choices, and preferences so we can create effective policies that can combat future pandemics by learning from the past.
- Research how other countries are dealing with teleworking so SCAG and possibly the country can emulate success stories and to find best practices.
- Provide information/guidance to local jurisdictions post COVID-19 on how to:
  - Better design public spaces to continue social distancing guidelines,
  - Reuse empty office space that is likely to be a result of the pandemic,
  - Consider impact of density on public health because social distancing has created an idea that density is dangerous, yet the data shows that overcrowding is the danger,
  - Address reduced services like libraries and public spaces,
  - Better direct funding for pandemic recovery efforts,
  - Navigate housing element updates, recovering lost revenues, meeting SB743 requirements and public outreach as zoom can be a barrier for capturing community feedback.
- Research data like travel flow, internet usage, utility usage and water usage during pandemic to better inform future recommendations for assumptions.
- Research and address racial inequality, not just socio-economic inequality.
- Develop scenario tools to better estimate regional telework and flexible work schedules.
- Estimate benefits of mobility investments that support recovery and identify strategies that prioritize health and safety and equity.
- Develop a 'brain trust' through SCAG to share lessons learned and best practices with local jurisdictions.
- Consider impacts to the 2028 Olympics; it could be a great economic opportunity.
- Develop toolkits, like emergency planning toolkits, to help smaller agencies deal with crisis management.

## Convening and Collaboration

SCAG has a role in convening partners and decision makers from across the region. Areas of suggested collaboration include:

- Develop strategic partnerships to help people understand how they can be a part of emerging, technology-based economy post COVID-19.
- Work with CTCs to increase transit ridership and seeks ways to help the region meet GHG targets by increasing service to vulnerable populations and implementing HQTAs.
- Collaborate with the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and others across the U.S.

- Convene counties to encourage local intraregional travel to support hospitality and leisure industries while people may not be comfortable flying in order to balance public health and safety with efforts to improve the economy.
- SCAG should engage with California Coastal Commission to help with RHNA numbers.
- Provide a platform to support and share best practices and local interventions that cities are exploring, such as open streets for recreation, safety, and businesses to allow physical distancing space.
- SCAG should convene the housing development community because housing generation will be key for economic recovery. This could help develop a regional housing pipeline similar to the model used in the bay area.

## Resources

Many communities are facing resource constraints and highlighted ways that SCAG can help.

Specific comments included:

### **SCAG should provide more support in identifying and noticing available resources**

- Make cities aware of opportunities like grants and resources available to help constituents.
- Help identify what is needed to apply for funds such as pre-requisites (break-down the barrier).
- Provide resource guide, such as a weekly email to jurisdictions with related deadlines.
- SCAG should help find resources for when rental assistance runs out so that people don't become unhoused.

### **SCAG should provide more grants for local planning**

- SCAG can also provide grants for emergency/resiliency planning.
- When SCAG does make grant awards, this information should be more transparent and posted online.
- SCAG grants to jurisdictions should be more flexible and timeline extensions should be given more often.

## Leadership

Specific comments included:

- SCAG can be leaders in the region about educating on public health. It's important as leaders and at SCAG for us to talk about public health and go beyond transportation and land-use.
- Best to properly identify and agree on singular challenge and come up with solution that helps all SCAG region. Maybe to work on solution to help businesses with their leasing agreements. Having all agree to a singular and unified problem is important.
- SCAG can act like a clearing house for new and creative ideas.

- It would be great for SCAG to support future legislative actions that would bring back community redevelopment agencies and support current bills such as SB 1299 (Portantino).
- Promote active transportation and don't backslide on sustainability goals and density.
- Request for SCAG letter to Governor on delay for 743 and the housing elements.
- There should be better transparency and communication across the region.
- SCAG can be leaders in the region about educating the education on public health.
- SCAG can help cities and transit agencies with crisis management and support identifying critical transit lines to connect people with essential services.
- Can SCAG have more ownership on the RTP project list, to advance the discussion, rather than just adopting what is already given out there?

## Recommendations for Communication and Engagement

Specific comments included:

- Important to do deep, thoughtful community engagement to ensure alignment with community needs and to guide our long-range vision and plan.
- What's the best way to reach out to jurisdictions?
  - Director to Director phone calls because staff is overloaded with emails during this time.
- Gathering public input is easier now that people can voice their opinions online, but digital divide and lack of broadband still remain an issue.
- SCAG is doing great things but the public is not aware of its efforts and programs that can potentially help their community so there needs to be more widespread outreach.
- SCAG should engage in more targeted outreach to disadvantaged communities.
- More efficient communication and information through SCAG from city/state/federal levels. This is important to keep all municipalities on the same page.
- Importance of public education and program of public dissemination, looking towards positive examples of public communication and education regarding COVID 19 such as Taiwan.

## Long Term Planning

Participants generally agreed that thinking about long-term planning right now is difficult with so many unknowns which creates challenges in making basic assumptions and projections. At this time, there are many more questions than answers.

Specific questions and comments included:

### **What are the long term impacts to transit?**

- When will transit riders come back (or will they)? Will service continue to be reduced?
- How can transit be rebuilt or reimagined going forward?

- How many “choice” transit riders will come back to public transit after COVID-19?
- How will this impact the Gold Line construction and use once it’s complete?
- Need more coordination on transit agencies in order for it to be reliable, especially in terms of commuter train schedules.
- Consider transit investments that are more geographically widespread instead of primarily investing transit to reach major job centers.
- There is a limit on parking so there will be economic decisions that people will have to make which will bring them back to transit.

#### **What are the long term trends for teleworking and virtual communication?**

- Equity issues of who can and cannot work from home remains an issue to be addressed.
- Will increased teleworking change where people want to live and increase demand for more suburban housing?
- Telecommuting and differences in post-pandemic commuting patterns should be taken into account with RHNA.
- Will there need to be more infrastructure in residential areas or of certain types like broadband?
- Broadband and telework should be considered as a stronger VMT reduction and environmental mitigation strategy.
- How will people be connecting with each other in the future? Will activities shift from in-person to online?

#### **How will revenues for business and local governments be impacted long-term?**

- The long-term impacts also include concerns about funding local community and nonprofit organizations that serve our vulnerable populations, including those organizations that provide housing and supportive services.
- Planning will be difficult with the declining revenue for cities and facing uncertainty when they can’t afford to respond to changes.
- Helping with goods movement and helping discretionary sales will be critical today.
- Could the 2028 Olympics and the stimulus package benefit in bringing the region up economically?

#### **What other planning and operations needs may emerge due to COVID-19?**

- Equity concerns, around housing and transportation, emerging as a key issue.
- If COVID-19 turns out to be long term and there is no medical treatment for it, how do we restructure to adapt to social distancing?
- Micromobility and mobility for seniors increasingly important.

- Active transportation investment is and will continue to be very important.
- Several participants shared examples or ideas for changing operations into the future. For example:
  - Ventura County Transportation Commission has seen significant ridership decline but the CARES Act has delayed the financial impact to the agency by 1-2 years. The Commissioners have asked that consolidation of the 8 transit agencies to 1 or 2 service providers be explored to improve service and cut costs.
  - What will return-to-work safety look like, especially in the airport environment? Business will need to develop and finance new protocols to make customers and employees feel safe: cleaning, PPE, etc.

**SCAG should explore how the region can be more resilient**

- Consider how we develop a system that is resilient to economic shocks and climate change and how SCAG takes a role in public health.
- Major themes to building a resilient community are food, water, air, and housing security.
- Incorporate lessons from Asia (SARS), incorporate lessons learned in transportation and business.

**Specific recommendations for Connect SoCal included:**

- The Environmental Justice Technical Report and Public Health Technical Report should include revisions/addendums to address occupancy, transportation and other impacts from COVID-19.
- The plan should be modified to emphasize alternative transportation like active transportation.
- Recommend a one-year extension for Connect SoCal adoption
- Delay plan and complete additional studies before locking in highway expansion. The funding for highway projects included in the Plan should go towards active transportation and investing in broadband.
- Connect SoCal can focus on:
  - Housing – transit rich and job rich areas, high opportunity areas,
  - SCAG could provide a city-level interactive map that shows city parcels that show high opportunity areas to develop housing,
  - Opportunity with improvements to Metrolink – another important collaboration for SCAG to improve the network to reduce GHG/VMT – this is a critical regional resource.
  - Investing in BRT, bus only lanes, SCAG needs to push a collaborative multi-modal approach to help busses and bikes and goods movement – all have an important role and must be considered.
- Invest in goods movement system to ensure efficiency of networks and importance of movement in goods services.

## Housing and Community Development

### Participants offered various thoughts on RHNA:

- Affordable housing is a huge need, Orange County Business Council recommends that SCS works with RHNA.
- There is a lot of frustration with RHNA in Orange County. Older communities do not feel they have room to add more housing. SCAG should be helping with this.
- Consider single-room-occupancy housing solutions as meeting RHNA goals instead of funneling resources to tent cities or hotel rooms which are short term and wasteful. If this could count towards meeting RHNA goals, cities would have an incentive to maintain SRO hotels.
- Can COVID -19 funds (*or Measure HHH funds*) be used to buy some of these buildings, including unused hospitals and retrofit for a permanent affordable housing?

### Thoughts related to the need for affordable housing, increased housing supply and type, and supporting neighborhoods:

- The region needs to promote 'moderately priced affordable housing' similar to east coast development requirements.
- The region needs to leverage the housing supply to establish a housing pipeline that connects developers to cities that can fill housing needs, local control, and economic recovery.
- What is needed is starter homes, so that young people or lower income workers can get into the housing market.
- SCAG should support all kinds of density. SCAG should understand how different population groups will need different housing types.
- How can we build up more robust and accessible neighborhoods?
- Could homeowners who are really close to the brink of foreclosure be helped to keep their homes?
- Will housing preferences shift, such as moving to the suburbs because teleworking is available and social distancing is easier?

### Need for housing related data and consistent policies across the region:

- Provide city specific maps that identify specific parcels where housing should be directed and is easy to develop/re-develop (e.g. no CEQA, administrative approvals).
- High density housing with links to public transit has been the goal for a long time. How can a variety of housing opportunities be provided with a link to public transportation, and how can it be done considering the pandemic and public health threats?
- The number of different policies from one jurisdiction to another that developers have to deal with is ever changing. Over the long term, these inconsistencies have a direct cost to construction and production for housing products of all types.