

Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund

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June 26, 2017
By E-Mail

Mary Nichols, Chair
California Air Resources Board
1001 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: 2017 Regional Target Update

Dear Ms. Nichols:

The Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund (TRANSDEF) is an environmental non-profit dedicated to the regional planning of transportation, land use and air quality. Our focus is on reducing the impacts of transportation on the climate. We have previously commented on multiple versions of the Scoping Plan and Regional Targets. Page references are to the Staff Report, Proposed Update to the SB 375 Greenhouse Gas Emission Reduction Targets, unless otherwise noted. A separate letter will comment on the Environmental Assessment for the Targets Update.

Our organization has been involved in the development of RTPs at MTC for the past 23 years. We created what we believe to be the first published Sustainable Communities Strategy: the TRANSDEF Smart Growth Alternative, which was modeled in the MTC's 2005 RTP EIR. We were active participants in the Working Group that revised the CTC's RTP Guidelines in response to the adoption of AB 32 and SB 375. This breadth and depth of experience forms a basis for the following observations:

The Proposed Targets Fail to Meet the Requirements of SB 375

In the recently released inventory titled California Greenhouse Gas Emissions for 2000 to 2015 – Trends of Emissions and Other Indicators, the largest still-increasing single emissions category is passenger vehicles. TRANSDEF believes this source represents the largest threat to the achievement of Scoping Plan goals, as SB 375 foresaw long ago. The staff's response to that threat, their proposal for SB 375 regional GHG emissions target updates, is extraordinarily inadequate:

At the personal travel level, CARB staff's proposed targets are equivalent to reducing VMT a half a mile per person per day. (p. 22.)

The staff report starts out reasonably enough:

CARB staff's top-down analysis estimates that SB 375 and other VMT reduction strategies need to provide a 25 percent reduction in statewide per capita greenhouse gas emissions relative to 2005 by 2035 to meet these goals... (*Id.*)

But then, as a casualty of obvious political pressure, the proposed targets offer only a 19.9% aggregate reduction, failing to meet that requirement. No justification is provided in the staff report for this catering to the MPOs, other than vague references to funding (p. 19) and not being out of reach. (p. 24.) Even worse, nothing is said about the gap in emissions reductions, or where the reductions will come from, if not from transportation.

These comments on the proposed targets would have been far less critical, had we not just completed a set of detailed comments on MTC's 2017 RTP/SCS. We strongly suspect the following observations, based on a close reading of MTC's DEIR, are equally applicable to the other MPOs:

- There are no signs of VMT reduction. To the contrary, drive-alone trips will increase by 21% by 2040. As a result, GHG emissions are projected to increase by 20%, prior to off-model adjustments.
- Large amounts of funding are dedicated to highway expansion, MTC's primary strategy for future mobility--even though ARB research has documented the futility of that strategy in papers on induced demand.
- Mode shares remain static through 2040, indicating that new residents are not projected to drive any less than current residents. This indicates that the SCS has had **no beneficial effect** on land use, VMT or GHG emissions.
- The DEIR claims that "There are no additional land use strategies available to feasibly bridge the gap between the proposed Plan GHG emissions and 2030 (and beyond) targets." (DEIR p. 2.5-43.) By this, they mean there are no strategies they are **willing** to adopt.
- The absence of any formal coordination between county plans and the SCS acts as a green light for counties to continue with Business as Usual.

We are confident that ARB staff plans to track near-term indicators of SCS implementation (p. 26) will confirm these findings.

In toto, MTC's approach to SB 375 is to not even seriously try to reduce VMT. This is reflected in Table 2 (p. 19), where MTC provided no quantitative data to ARB. MTC refused to study a GHG Emissions Reduction Alternative proposed by TRANSDEF.

TRANSDEF is enormously troubled by ARB's catering to this intransigence, in the midst of a climate emergency. Scientists inform us that there are only a few years left to correct our emissions overhang before irreversible changes take place. We call on ARB to apply what it knows in setting these targets--and not be swayed by the MPOs' resistance to change. Do not take their protestations at face value.

SB 375

We believe this proposal, if adopted, would constitute a failure to perform a mandatory duty under SB 375 to cut regional emissions from cars and light trucks. The legislative findings make it clear what SB 375 set out to accomplish:

...greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles and light trucks can be substantially reduced by new vehicle technology and by the increased use of low carbon fuel. However, even taking these measures into account, it will be necessary to achieve **significant additional** greenhouse gas reductions from changed land use patterns and improved transportation. Without improved land use and transportation policy, California will not be able to achieve the goals of AB 32. (Chapter 728, Statutes of 2008, Section 1(c) and (i), emphasis added.)

The staff report is silent on whether the targets will result in significant additional GHG reductions from changed land use patterns and improved transportation, despite that analysis being the key to what is required by SB 375. Instead, it only discusses per capita GHG emissions reductions, which is a different metric--and not directly relevant.

The Missing Analysis

In 2010, TRANSDEF commented that the calculations for the draft regional GHG emissions reduction targets showed total 2020 regional transportation-related emissions that were higher than 2005, and higher still in 2035. The 2017 staff report provides no such analysis, sticking only with per capita GHG emissions. While it may be legally acceptable to administer the SB 375 program using per capita targets, the failure to demonstrate a reduction in total regional transportation-related emissions constitutes a failure to perform mandatory duties under SB 375.

What's missing is a discussion of population growth and the mode choices for new residents living amidst the supposedly more efficient land use pattern of the SCS. Comparing the relative magnitude of the increment of growth to the existing population will allow a projection of total transportation-related GHG emissions.

The 2010 per capita GHG percentage emission reduction targets resulted in **increases in total GHG emissions**, because they were set lower than the expected percentage increase in population growth. This is ARB's dirty little secret: it allows ARB to avoid pressuring MPOs to perform in ways they strongly resist.

Problems With the Staff Report

How can the following statement possibly be true, when the targets do not achieve the 25% reduction target?

CARB staff's proposed targets are consistent with the SB 375 target update objectives discussed in Section II [p. 4-5].
(p. 24.)

Note that the objectives do not include reducing total regional transportation-related GHG emissions. Why is that, and does that absence mean that the objectives fail to comply with AB 32 and SB 375?

These targets do not force MPOs to give up on expanding capacity for solo drivers. Because California has not seen any VMT reductions yet under the lax conditions of current policy, future VMT reductions under similarly lax conditions are very unlikely.

It should have been obvious to ARB that funding is not the problem MPOs have claimed. (p. 19.) The problem isn't money. MPOs don't want to stop allocating funds to roadway capacity. There would be enough funding if MPOs were directed to stop expanding roadway capacity.

TRANSDEF is unaware of any significant mode shift so far resulting from SB 375. VMT has continued to climb.

San Joaquin Valley Targets

The very fact that the San Joaquin Valley is expected to grow so much means it can realistically handle a much higher target. The problem is obviously that it doesn't want to change its sprawled land use pattern. Is it really acceptable for the Valley to actually increase its GHG emissions? Giving the Valley an aggressive target will encourage the use of Best Practices for new development. It is crucial to not squander the opportunity to reshape settlement patterns. This will make a tremendous difference in 2050 emissions.

Induced Demand

Caltrans and the MPOs are stuck in a 1980's view that expanding capacity reduces congestion and therefore reduces GHG emissions. That view is the result of using obsolete models, which fail to account for induced demand. Current ARB research indicates that while highway widening may have congestion relief benefits in the short-term, in the long-term such projects induce further demand, resulting in increased trips, longer trips, and increased VMT and GHG emissions. (Impact of Highway Capacity and Induced Travel on Passenger Vehicle Use and Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 2014.) Because of travel models that fail to accurately represent induced demand, MPOs are significantly undercounting the emissions-increasing impacts of their highway expansion programs. This is worrisome as regards selecting infrastructure investments that will set a foundation for achieving California's very aggressive 2050 goals.

Pricing

A founding principle of ARB's target setting has been that because land use effects are long-term, it is logical that the 2020 targets be lower than the 2035 targets. This completely ignores the realm of pricing measures, which can be implemented very quickly. Pricing requires strong leadership to educate the public about the need for the increased price of driving. We fully recognize this will take political courage and offer to assist in any way we can.

Timing

We reject the idea that lower, more achievable, targets are a wise idea. We don't have 10 or 20 years to build confidence. Unfortunately, climate is not a problem that can be responded to at a pace that is comfortable for government.

Margin of Safety

We recommend that target setting include the provision of a margin of safety, as is commonplace in the setting of health-based criteria pollutant standards.

Conclusion

The ARB is responsible for determining which regional targets will best implement the intent of AB 32. The question "will we accomplish our Scoping Plan goals with these targets?" should have been central to the target-setting process. But it clearly wasn't. It looks to us like the target setting process has been turned into a process that caters to the MPOs' desire for minimal controversy, rather than a process with "a sound technical basis." We are fully cognizant of the political challenges faced by ARB. TRANSDEF urges the Air Resources Board to step up to the challenge, armed with the best science available.

Right now, science is telling us what needs to be done and government is not doing it. This target setting process is not just a technical exercise. ARB's work needs to become a national and global model for the responsible planning of development. If human civilization is to survive global warming, it is crucial that targets be adopted that lead to sufficient change to meet the State's aggressive goals. Failure to do so is not an option.

The top-down process tied to the Scoping Plan's goals provides needed justification for making uncomfortable policy decisions at the State, regional and local levels. Local elected officials especially need this kind of evidentiary backup--they will be on the front lines, making scary decisions for a public that does not like change. Please give them the leadership and the guidance they need to play their part in the upcoming difficult transition to a low-carbon way of life.

We would be pleased to answer any questions you might have, at the phone number above.

Sincerely,

/s/ DAVID SCHONBRUNN

David Schonbrunn,
President