Sustainable Communities Task Force – CalSTA Report

DRAFT

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Message from the Secretary

I’m grateful to the members of the Sustainable Communities Task Force for contributing their valuable time, expertise and diverse perspectives to this important effort. Their thoughtful engagement brought critical focus to both the challenges California faces and the opportunities before us as we work to better align transportation, housing and land use decisions. The recommendations in this report provide a practical foundation for continued collaboration and meaningful progress across the state while reflecting the values of Governor Newsom’s administration and advancing CalSTA’s Core Four priorities: safer transportation, accelerated climate action, greater equity and stronger economic prosperity for communities in every corner of California. I look forward to building on the Task Force’s essential work with our state, regional, local and community partners to deliver a more connected, sustainable and prosperous future for all Californians.

Toks Omishakin

Secretary, California State Transportation Agency

Acknowledgements

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- California High Speed Rail (HSR)
- California Housing and Homelessness Agency (CHHA)
- California Transportation Commission (CTC)
- Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD)
- Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI)
- Strategic Growth Council (SGC)

List of Acronyms

Abbreviation	Meaning
AB	Assembly bill
ATP	Active transportation program
CalSTA	California State Transportation Agency
Caltrans	California Department of Transportation
CARB	California Air Resources Board
CTC	California Transportation Commission
ETL	Express toll lanes
FY	Fiscal Year
GHG	Greenhouse gas
HOT	High occupancy toll
HOV	High occupancy vehicle
LEAP	Local early action planning program
MPO	Metropolitan planning organization
REAP	Regional early action planning program
REAP 2.0	Regional early action planning 2.0 program
RTP	Regional transportation plan
RUC	Road use charge
SB	Senate bill
SCS	Sustainable community strategy
SCS/RTP	Sustainable community strategy/regional transportation plan
SGC	Strategic Growth Council
SHS	State highway system
TIRCP	Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program
ITS-Davis	UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies
VMT	Vehicle miles traveled

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Executive Summary

The Sustainable Communities Task Force (SCTF), convened by Secretary Omishakin and the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA), was established to address California's persistent challenges in achieving sustainable community outcomes. This report synthesizes findings from SCTF meetings, interviews, and a policy memo authored by the Institute of Transportation Studies and the University of California, Davis (ITS-Davis). The recent enactment of SB 1087 (Cabaldon, 2026) represents an important step toward modernizing California's Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) framework and strengthening coordination among regional transportation planning, housing, and climate objectives. Building on this progress, the report identifies opportunities to support implementation of this policy framework and improve coordination and project delivery.

As the Task Force embarked on what was to be a year-long process, they convened at the outset and deliberated to identify the key themes most important to examine in this process. To start, the 30 members and eight state agencies making up the Task Force were surveyed about important problems for the Task Force to address, and the results revealed a diversity of perspectives but also several common observations that safety, transit time and reliability, walking and biking access, air pollution, and lack of transportation options were important problems for the Task Force to discuss. Over a series of in-person convenings and one-on-one interviews between Task Force members and CalSTA's academic research partner UC-Davis ITS, these key themes were explored.

Despite significant state investments and policy advancements, California continues to face challenges in meeting transportation-related greenhouse gas (GHG) and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reduction targets, increasing housing supply and affordability, and improving roadway safety. The SCTF discussed that multimodal transportation networks—such as walking, biking, and transit connections—fail to be funded and built despite their critical role in reducing GHGs and VMT. Housing supply and affordability remain acute challenges, with a shortage of 2.5 million homes and persistent homelessness, and approximately 3,800 roadway fatalities in 2024. This report highlights the importance of linking transportation and housing policy, noting that transit-oriented development (TOD) can reduce VMT and deliver positive equity outcomes, but require deliberate policy efforts to prevent displacement and ensure affordability and sustainable growth.

The SCTF examined the effectiveness of state programs and policies, including the Active Transportation Program (ATP), Regional Early Action Planning Grants (REAP), and the Climate Action Plan for Transportation Infrastructure (CAPTI). While these programs have made progress, funding remains fragmented and insufficient to meet demand. This report discusses the impact of highway expansion, pricing strategies, and the importance of prioritizing "fix-it-first" approaches to maintain existing infrastructure; the utility of improved alignment of existing funding with sustainable community goals; and the potential for new, dedicated funding to accelerate progress.

Task Force discussions landed on several areas of common ground: broaden performance metrics for sustainable communities beyond GHG and VMT; establish a clear vision and goals for transportation and land use policy; consider the role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs); and streamline project delivery. This report emphasizes the importance of institutional reforms, process improvements, and state leadership in advancing sustainable community outcomes.

Drawing on these discussions and supporting research, CalSTA identifies recommendations for continued progress on sustainable communities. These recommendations focus on strengthening the implementation of existing policies, improving interagency coordination and technical assistance, maximizing the effectiveness of transportation investments, supporting more predictable project delivery, and evaluating opportunities to address demonstrated funding and infrastructure needs. The recommendations are intended to complement recent legislative reforms, while informing potential future administrative and policy actions to advance sustainable communities throughout California.

Introduction

About the Sustainable Communities Task Force

Task Force Members

CalSTA invited 30 transportation industry, intergovernmental, and land use stakeholders representing an inclusive, cross-sector of leaders from state and regional agencies, local governments, transit providers, community-based organizations, housing and environmental advocates, academic institutions, and rural and underserved communities. Members were selected to bring diverse perspectives on how California can advance sustainable communities goals and strengthen coordination across transportation, housing, and land use policies. See the Acknowledgements section for a full list of members.

The SCTF was convened as an advisory and information-sharing forum to examine existing research, identify recurring themes and areas of common ground, and explore opportunities to strengthen implementation of California's sustainable communities policies. The process was intended to inform ongoing policy discussions rather than develop or advocate for specific legislative, budgetary, or other specific policy outcomes. Accordingly, the findings and recommendations in this report reflect CalSTA's synthesis of the discussions and supporting research and are intended to inform future policy considerations and implementation efforts, rather than represent formal Administration commitments to pursue particular policy or funding actions.

At the launch meeting, the first SCTF meeting, in September 2025, members were surveyed about important problems for the Task Force to address. Figure 1 represents the diversity of viewpoints involved in the SCTF:

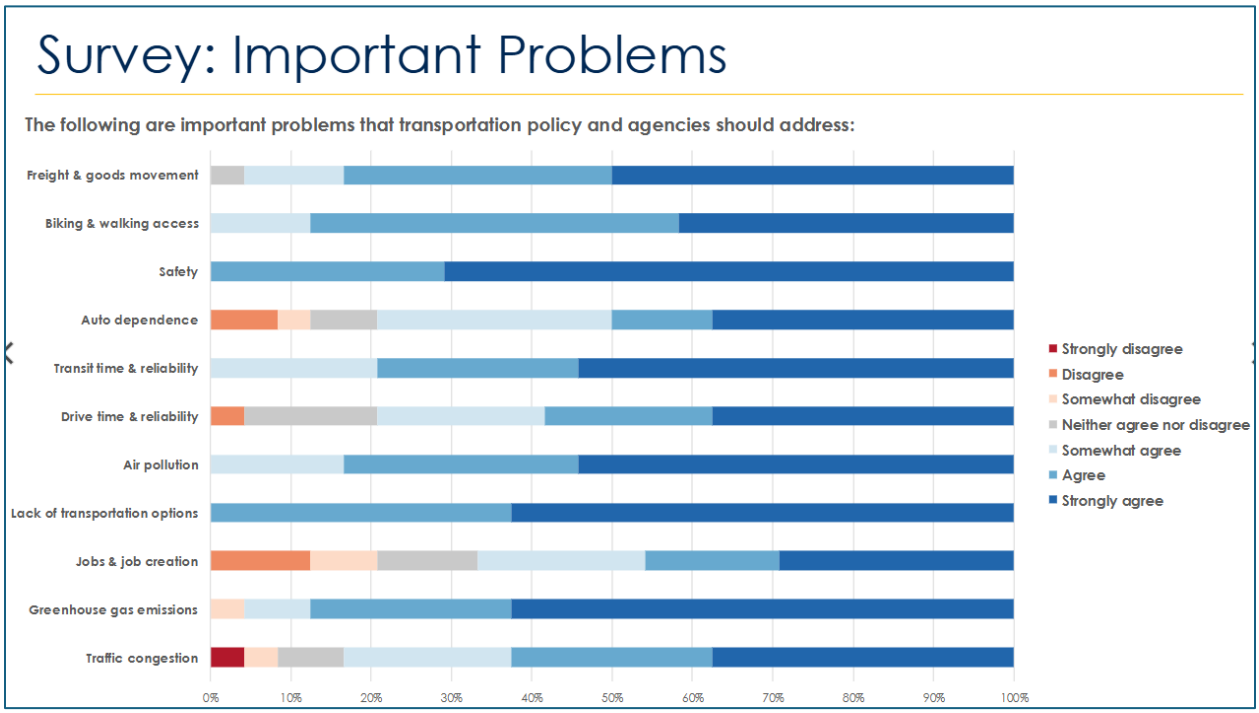


Figure 1

This figure demonstrates many Task Force members made observations that safety, lack of transportation options, walking and biking access, air pollution, and transit time and reliability were important problems for the Task Force to discuss. While a mix of viewpoints existed, members of the SCTF found areas of common ground, as expanded upon in this report.

Motivation

Transportation continues to be the largest emitting sector of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs).[1] Leaders at CalSTA recognize that the relationship between transportation and land use is key to reducing GHGs long term, and the state has a leadership role in supporting land use that is equitable, efficient, and facilitates healthy communities for all.

The SCTF builds on over two decades of climate planning in order to achieve the goals set out in policies such as the California Air Resources Board (CARB) Scoping Plan and its legislative mandates AB 32 (Pavley, 2006) and SB 32 (Pavley, 2016) to reach statewide carbon neutrality by 2045, and Senate Bill (SB) 375 (Steinberg, 2008) which links regional transportation and land use planning to CARB's Scoping Plan through a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS). A SCS is a state-mandated regional plan that ensures transportation investments and local land use patterns are planned together in

California. A SCS must be incorporated directly into a region's federally-required long-range Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). Each of the 18 MPO regions receive GHG targets for their respective RTP/SCSs. These plans identify the coordinated transportation and land use strategies to achieve specific regional per capita GHG emission reduction targets set by CARB for passenger vehicles for years 2020, 2035, and for carbon neutrality in 2045 (Executive Order B-55-18). Building on SB 375, the enactment of SB 1087 (Cabaldon, 2026) modernized California's SCS planning framework, reflecting the state's ongoing efforts to improve regional planning, accountability, and coordination among housing, transportation, and climate objectives. California also tracks progress toward regional sustainable communities goals through periodic implementation reporting, providing an opportunity to assess outcomes, identify challenges, and inform continued improvements.

The state has also taken several actions to support the implementation of sustainable communities. In 2019, Assembly Bill (AB) 285 (Friedman, 2019) directed the California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) to produce an assessment of the transportation planning and funding activities at the state and regional levels while exploring options for improved alignment of funding programs to better meet long-term common goals, including reductions in GHG and VMT. In 2020, Caltrans implemented SB 743 (Steinberg, 2013), prompting a change in how to analyze and mitigate environmental impacts from new development and transportation projects. Also in 2020, CalSTA developed the Climate Action Plan for Transportation Infrastructure (CAPTI), a strategic investment framework designed to align state transportation funding with broader climate, public health, and social equity goals. SB 960 (Wiener, 2024) codifies and expands upon many of Caltrans' existing efforts related to complete streets. It acknowledges and advances Caltrans' efforts to incorporate safe and convenient bicycle, pedestrian, and transit facilities in projects on the state highway system (SHS). In 2025, CalSTA in collaboration with stakeholders published the Transit Transformation Task Force Report, a blueprint for how California can reimagine public transit to deliver a more connected, sustainable and equitable future.[2] The State has also hosted funding programs to support sustainable community outcomes. These programs include Regional Early Action Plan (REAP) and Active Transportation Program (ATP) grants.

Coordinated state, regional, and local action is important for SCS implementation. Local government actions greatly influence overall regional VMT.[3] They may also influence the use of zero-emission vehicles. Executive Order N-79-20 transitions California toward zero-emission vehicles, establishing a target that 100% of in-state sales of new passenger cars and light-duty trucks be zero-emission by 2035. Transitioning California's fleet from internal combustion engines to an electrified fleet will greatly mitigate climate change. However, achieving sustainable communities is broader than just reducing tailpipe GHG emissions. Rather than solely relying on the transition to electric vehicles to slow climate change, creating sustainable communities can have many advantages and derive greater near-term quality of life outcomes—sustainable communities are convenient and more economical for residents and workers. They make it easier to walk, bike and take transit. They reduce the cost burden of relying on cars for every trip. They are also healthier and more livable. These advantages come from coordinated planning for land use, housing, and transportation.[4]

Implementation of sustainable community strategies are funded through a mix of fuel tax and vehicle fee revenue dedicated for transportation funding, through federal and state discretionary dollars, and through local and regional sources.[5] The growing adoption of zero-emission vehicles and increasing fuel efficiency in internal combustion engine vehicles is projected to lead to a decline in state transportation revenues over the long run as Californians purchase less gasoline and generate less gasoline excise tax revenue. The California Legislative Analyst's Office predicts these revenue declines will affect state transportation programs. Funding provided to Caltrans' highway maintenance and rehabilitation programs and to cities and counties to support local streets and roads is projected to be heavily impacted, creating challenges to maintaining the existing transportation system while building out much-needed multimodal infrastructure.[6]

To address deferred maintenance on the SHS and local street and road system, SB 1Road Repair and Accountability Act(Beall, 2017), was signed to invest $5.4 billion annually to fix roads, freeways and bridges in communities across California and puts more dollars toward transit and safety. These funds are split between state and local investments, while CAPTI provides a holistic framework to guide the state's investment of SB 1 dollars. Though SB 1 helped address deferred maintenance of the transportation system, the long-term impact of declining transportation revenues on building out sustainable transportation options continues to loom.

Despite significant progress in advancing sustainable communities through state investments and policy initiatives, challenges remain. California is still falling short of meeting its state targets for transportation greenhouse gases and VMT reduction.[7] The SCTF was convened to identify the gap between all we have accomplished, and what actions remain to be done.

Process

The SCTF convened five times between September 2025 and August 2026. At the initial meetings in September and October 2025, Task Force members helped set the agenda for the year to come. In December 2025, the Task Force explored what it would take to achieve transformative investments in active transportation, focusing on multimodal networks and safety. In February 2026, the Task Force identified differences and opportunities between transportation, land use, and housing policy, and actual implementation. After meeting four times, the Task Force determined that shifting to one-on-one interviews with academic research partner ITS-Davis could solicit more in-depth responses from the Task Force. Therefore, the Task Force members participated in individual confidential interviews with ITS-Davis during March 2026 through July 2026. These interviews focused on the sustainable community impacts of pricing the transportation system highway expansion, and lane conversion projects, in addition to topics discussed in earlier meetings or brought up by Task Force members. The Task Force convened for a final time in August 2026 to discuss the key findings from these interviews. Key findings of the task force process are memorialized in a policy memo authored by ITS-Davis, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/61t1z4c1.

Task Force Evidence Base

California has targets and goals for reducing GHG emissions, reducing per capita VMT, housing affordability and supply, traffic safety, and land conservation. Despite efforts by local, regional, and state government, additional progress is needed to achieve California's goals.[8] Through Task Force meetings, members grappled with the complexity and scale of solutions needed to move the needle on increasing sustainable community outcomes statewide. The following sections outline information presented to Task Force members in meetings and informs how to achieve sustainable community goals.

Transformative Investments in Active Transportation Networks, Transit, and Safety

The Task Force discussed that providing safe networks for walking, biking, rolling and first and last mile connections with transit is a key strategy for reducing GHGs and VMT and for meeting safety goals. The state Active Transportation Program (ATP), allocated and overseen by the California Transportation Commission (CTC), was created out of a combination of federal and state funds and augmented by SB 1 (Beall, 2017). While ATP has funded 1,230 projects across seven award cycles, the Program is regularly oversubscribed.[9] A majority of MPOs rely on active transportation in their SCS/RTPs. A guiding principle of CAPTI is investing in networks of safe and accessible bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, particularly by closing gaps on portions of the state highway system that intersect local active transportation and transit networks or serve as small town or rural main streets, with a focus on investments in low-income and disadvantaged communities throughout the state. CAPTI calls for more funding for the ATP, as MPOs rely heavily on the ATP to implement their RTP/SCS, municipalities rely on the ATP to construct active transportation infrastructure, and the ATP remains heavily oversubscribed.

SCTF members discussed how active transportation infrastructure generates a range of sustainable community benefits, in addition to mitigating climate change, making it an important facet in supporting healthier people, healthier environments, safety, affordability, quality of life and equity. Despite the benefits these modes provide, walking and bicycling rates are down statewide.[10] In 2021, 81.7% of Californians used a private vehicle as primary mode of transportation, with just 14.8% walking and 1.4% bicycling.[11] It is a goal of the state to reduce VMT, but California does not currently have a goal or measure strategic action towards increasing walking and biking.

As the cost of housing and inflation have driven up household costs, household transportation costs remain high.[12] High transportation costs are also regressive, where the lowest income households spends a greater portion of their income on transportation as compared to higher income households.[13] Active transportation offers an affordable mode of transportation during a time when the average cost of owning and operating an automobile has sharply ticked up.[14]

Task Force members discussed the importance of safety when defining a sustainable community. Since 2010, California roadway fatalities and serious injuries have increased by 52%.[15,16] Similarly, since 2010, pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries have increased by 48%.[17] People walking and biking in the United States and in California are disproportionately at risk of fatality as compared to those traveling by other transportation modes.[18] Furthermore, the risk of pedestrian and bicycling fatalities and serious injury is not equal, with people ages of 15-24 years old, male and people of color bearing the brunt of this burden due to a number of factors including historic inequities that have left communities lacking safe active transportation infrastructure.[19,20]

Risk of serious injury and fatalities is tied to transportation infrastructure and other street features. A majority of fatal crashes occur at night and on weekends, and low-income communities are far less likely to have street lighting and sidewalks as compared to high-income areas.[21] The risk of pedestrian death increases as speeds increase—a collision at 23 miles per hour results in 10% risk of death, where a collision at 58 miles per hour results in 90% risk of death.[22]

Improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure with more protected facilities is significantly associated with fewer fatalities and better road safety outcomes for all road uses, including drivers. As more people walk and bike, this correlates with increased safety since the relative risk for people walking and biking is reduced when more people walk and bike.[23] Research has found that protected bicycle and pedestrian facilities are most effective in addressing safety and boosting mode share when they form a comprehensive network.[24] Critical segments can have a significant impact on their own, particularly if they connect important destinations, but their impact is likely to increase as the extent of the network increases.[25] Building active transportation networks can be especially transformational for a region when paired with other system transportation changes such as first and last mile connections with transit, human-centered street scaping, slowing cars, restricting car access from bicycle and pedestrian-dense areas, pricing the roadway, reducing parking and enforcing speeds.[26] However, Task Force members noted that building citywide or regional active transportation networks can be challenging to implement and maintain because of limited resources for planning and construction .

Active transportation networks are essential to advancing California's climate, equity, safety, mobility, and affordability goals, yet current funding levels and fragmented program structures limit the State's ability to deliver the comprehensive, connected systems communities need. Despite clear evidence that protected, well-integrated walking and biking networks improve safety, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and expand affordable mobility options, ATP remains oversubscribed and walking and bicycling rates continue to decline. Sustained, coordinated investment—paired with measurable statewide mode-share targets, streamlined delivery, and alignment across transportation, land use, and housing policy—is vital to build the transformative, low-stress networks that Californians need to support healthier, more resilient, and more sustainable communities.

Differences and Opportunities Between Transportation, Land Use, and Housing Policy and Implementation

Task Force members expressed that housing supply and housing affordability are also key components of a sustainable community. California has a housing shortage of 2.5 million homes, of which there is a shortage of one million homes for lower-income households. While there are early indications of reductions in homelessness, more than 100,000 Californians still face homelessness. 75% of extremely low-income renters pay more than half their income on housing, and black renters are 41% more severely cost-burdened than white renters in California.[27]

State policy reform has taken place to address California's housing shortage. California sets clear housing targets among regions and local governments using the Regional Housing Needs Assessment and Allocation (RHNA) and sets a 'North Star' for more location-efficient housing, faster. Coalescing under this shared goal, numerous state laws and incentives are aimed at making it easier and faster to build housing, promoting housing where it's needed, facilitating housing at higher densities, and ensuring housing options at all income levels, such as the Department of Housing and Community Development's Pro-Housing Designation program. Policy implementation and enforcement of state laws are leading to tangible results.[28] Total housing activity is up, there has been growth in affordable housing, increases in housing density, and increased housing accountability throughout the state.[29] California housing policy offers a model of governance reform to achieve sustainable community outcomes.

Transportation policy can also help to accelerate infill and housing development to impact California's housing crisis, and location-efficient housing can reduce GHGs and VMT. There are inextricable links between transportation and land use—transportation policy and investments impact travel patterns and land use development patterns and can move us closer to (or farther away) from meeting our sustainable community goals.[30]

Many state laws preempt local zoning in areas near transit. For example, AB 2097 (Friedman, 2022) prohibits local governments from imposing parking requirements within a half-mile of existing or planned major transit stops. Another example is SB 79 (Wiener, 2025), which makes qualifying transit-oriented housing developments an allowed use on sites zoned for residential, mixed, or commercial development that are located near specified transit stops in urban transit counties. Cities vary in how enthusiastically they are implementing these policies. For parking requirements, AB 2097 grants considerable local discretion in requesting exemptions, as described in statute (for electric vehicles, disabled parking). For both AB 2097 and SB 79, local governments have varied interpretations of what constitutes "near transit" or what transit facilities qualify; therefore, local responses often depend on a city's preexisting interest, and enforcing these statewide land use laws is challenging.[31]

There is a strong impact of residential transit proximity on household VMT.[32] TOD residents have substantially lower VMT per household than non-TOD residents. Generally, TOD residents are more likely to use transit and active transportation, own

fewer vehicles, and make fewer and shorter auto trips than residents in conventional low-density suburban areas.[33]

Location-efficient housing delivers positive outcomes for equitable communities. Studies generally find that low-income households benefit expenditure-wise from living in TOD housing. While TOD tends to be higher-priced, lower transportation costs in TOD areas generally outweigh higher housing costs.[34] But, studies find that the benefits are attenuated for very low-income TOD residents, making the case to increase the provision or subsidization of TOD housing for low-income residents.[35] As studied, only a small share of neighborhoods and housing units across both TOD and non-TOD areas were affordable to very low-income households. For TOD residents in the lowest income category, lower transportation costs did not offset housing costs as a percent of household income.[36]

With any new development or redevelopment comes concerns over displacement and gentrification. However, considerable amounts of research indicate that infill investment in areas near transit do not, on average, lead to displacement of existing residents. In fact, it often instead results in lower rents. California studies corroborate this finding.[37] Nonetheless, to prevent displacement, deliberate policy efforts (such as renter protections, inclusionary housing requirements, density bonus programs, and more) are needed to protect and increase affordable housing and business space in neighborhoods experiencing TOD.[38]

For a sustainable community, transportation and housing policy must work together. However, expansion of the highway system has historically led to direct displacement of homes. Caltrans reports that between 2020 and 2023, 317 homes and 306 businesses were directly displaced due to transportation projects acquiring rights-of-way for new lane miles on the State Highway System.[39] The displacement-causing highway projects consisted of both state and locally sponsored projects. In a time when California is focused on delivering more location-efficient housing, faster, the highway expansion-related displacement of homes runs contrary to meeting state goals. Taking steps to address this, CAPTI 2.0 (2025) includes a community resilience action for Caltrans:

> *Create a Caltrans Director's Policy focused on displacement caused by projects on the state highway system with the intent to avoid future housing takings, particularly in disadvantaged communities.*

California's experience demonstrates that aligning transportation, land use, and housing policy with practical implementation requires more than policy innovation—it demands ongoing collaboration, adaptability, and a willingness to address structural barriers. By focusing on actionable solutions and fostering partnerships across state, regional, and local levels, California can better translate policy intent into tangible outcomes, supporting vibrant communities and sustainable growth.

Pricing the Transportation System

The Task Force discussed many forms of pricing, including roadway pricing on managed lanes, congestion pricing, a statewide road use charge (RUC), regional and local road user charges, and parking pricing as strategies for a sustainable community. Among the United States, the majority of states have a RUC program or pilot as an alternative or supplement to gasoline tax revenue that helps fund the maintenance of their transportation systems.[40] California's Road Charge Pilot Program launched in 2016 to explore a RUC, and the RUC Charge Collection Pilot culminated with a report as required by SB 339 (Wiener, 2021). The California Road Charge Program has examined different rate structures of a RUC, including an equity-based approach of collecting road charge rates by income. The four largest regions in California rely on a mix of VMT fees, cordon pricing, parking pricing and toll lane networks to reach their Sustainable Community Strategy greenhouse gas goals.[41]

The Task Force discussed pricing forms (roadway pricing on managed lanes, congestion pricing, and parking pricing) as useful strategies for addressing regional and state priorities for sustainable communities. CAPTI 2.0 (2025) directs Caltrans to create a Statewide Express Mobility Action Plan that defines the role of roadway pricing and includes equity-based best practices, in consultation with the Statewide Roadway Pricing Working Group and the Interagency Equity Advisory Committee. The plan will outline the role of roadway pricing on planned and existing facilities and include a clear roadmap for expanding facilities-based pricing mechanisms across California.

Of the 52,000 lane miles on the SHS that Caltrans manages, a minority of them (4.5%) are managed lanes. 1,519 miles are high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, and 98 additional miles are under construction. 565 miles are priced managed lanes (either express toll lanes [ETL] or high occupancy toll [HOT] lanes) with 166 more under construction.[42] HOV lanes generate about the same VMT as general purpose lanes and do not reduce VMT.[43] While most managed lanes are built as new highway capacity, the Streets and Highway Code authorizes the conversion of HOV lanes to priced managed lanes under certain conditions.[44]

Research shows that pricing initiatives tend to advance more effectively when higher-level government bodies actively endorse them. To accelerate pricing efforts in California, the Legislature and state transportation agencies would need to take a definitive stance in favor of these strategies. By comparison, relying on individual regions to pursue pricing on their own has generally faced greater political and institutional obstacles.[45]

The Impact of Highway Expansion and Lane Conversion of Achieving Sustainable Community Outcomes

Task Force members examined the role of the SHS in California's transportation landscape, considering its impacts on mobility, land use, and the pursuit of sustainable community objectives. According to the 2025 State and Local Transportation Needs Assessment estimated transportation needs exceed projected revenues by

approximately $215.8 billion through 2035.[46,47] As the California Transportation Plan 2050 Pathways analyzes, long-term transportation funding needs could be addressed through a combination of existing-resource prioritization, improved project delivery and cost efficiency, and expanded funding sources.[48]

State policy as described in CAPTI encourages use of the existing system to meet transportation needs. Central to CAPTI is the guiding principle:

> *Promoting projects that do not significantly increase passenger vehicle travel, particularly in congested urbanized settings where other mobility options can be provided and where projects are shown to induce significant auto travel. These projects should generally aim to reduce VMT and not induce significant VMT growth. When addressing congestion, consider alternatives to highway capacity expansion, such as providing multimodal options in the corridor, employing pricing strategies, and using technology to optimize operations.*

In fiscal year (FY) 2024-25, every Caltrans district experienced highway expansion, and 100 lane miles were added to the SHS.[49] During this period, 10.4 SHS lane miles were relinquished and 1.7 miles of general-purpose lanes were converted to managed lanes (HOV, HOT, ETL or transit lanes).[50]

Transportation investments can induce development growth from increases in transportation access.[51,52,53] In the post-interstate era of today, highway expansions tend to have a small net effect on population growth, economic activity, and land development.[54] Instead, they tend to redistribute growth around regions and facilitate low-density development, otherwise known as sprawl.[55] Sprawl embodies features of low-density population and development, isolated land uses, lack of well-defined community and activity centers, and road networks with large blocks and poor connectivity.[56]

Acknowledging the impacts of sprawl, CAPTI includes two other relevant guiding principles:

> *Promoting compact infill development while protecting residents and businesses from displacement by funding transportation projects that support housing for low-income residents near job centers, provide walkable communities, and address affordability to reduce the housing-transportation cost burden and auto trips.*
>
> *Protecting natural and working lands from conversion to more intensified uses and enhance biodiversity by supporting local and regional conservation planning that focuses development where it already exists and align transportation investments with conservation priorities to reduce transportation's impact on the natural environment.*

These principles help to guide strategic investment in transportation funding. Additionally, SB 743 (Steinberg, 2013) was implemented into Caltrans procedures in 2020 and prompted a change in the way the state measures the environmental impacts

of new development and transportation projects. In the past, projects were evaluated based on a mobility metric called Level of Service, a measure of vehicle delay. The new approach (VMT) evaluates the number and length of car trips induced by development and transportation projects.

Caltrans analyzed VMT, GHG, and mitigation associated with the lane miles added to the SHS.[57] 31 projects completed in FY2024-25 added lanes to the SHS, and six projects began environmental review on or after September 15, 2020, when SB 743 took effect. All six projects added less than 2.5 miles to the SHS, and they were determined to have less-than-significant impact on VMT. Therefore, no project completed in FY2024-25 met requirements to report VMT, greenhouse gas and mitigation associated with the lane miles added to the SHS.

The ongoing expansion of California's highway system present complex challenges for sustainable community development. While highways remain vital for mobility and economic activity, their growth contributes to increased VMT, dispersed land use patterns, and increased transportation costs. Recent policy shifts, such as the adoption of VMT metrics and efforts to plan integrated systems of infill development and multimodal transportation options, signal a move toward more balanced transportation investments. Continued attention to funding constraints, environmental impacts, and the integration of multimodal options will be necessary to ensure that highway projects support broader goals for safety, affordability, and environmental stewardship.

Common Themes

Sustainable Communities Task Force (SCTF) discussions provided an opportunity for members to share diverse perspectives, examine research and technical information, and identify challenges and opportunities related to advancing California's sustainable communities goals. While participants brought different experiences, priorities, and policy perspectives to these discussions, several recurring themes emerged.

The following section summarizes the key issues, perspectives, and common themes raised throughout the SCTF process. These themes reflect CalSTA's synthesis of the discussions and are not intended to represent formal consensus positions or recommendations adopted by the Task Force. Rather, they provide context for the subsequent section, which outlines CalSTA's recommendations for continued progress on sustainable communities, informed by these discussions and supporting research.

Establishing clarity and performance objectives around sustainable communities could improve outcomes. Task Force members discussed that reducing transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions is a critical policy priority, and that climate change demands urgent attention. They also opined that the scope of "sustainable communities" includes a wider array of performance measures—not just reductions in VMT or GHG. Positive impacts, such as increased safety and shares of walking and bicycling, can occur independently of VMT reductions, especially in the short term. Task Force members said that establishing a common set of measures

would increase objectivity and enable local, regional, and state agencies to be more accountable for progress.

Transportation and land use lacks a 'North Star' to steer policy and implementation. Some Task Force members voiced frustration with the way state, regional, and local transportation and land use goals are aggregated without clear prioritization, making it difficult to understand how objectives align or conflict. In contrast, the housing sector operates with a clear directive—"more location-efficient housing, faster"—that shapes all policy decisions. Adopting a common mission for sustainable communities could provide needed direction and help coordinate implementation efforts across agencies and programs.

Existing agencies have untapped potential to advance sustainable community goals. The Task Force discussed how institutional reforms and process improvements are essential for effective implementation, and highlighted opportunities to better utilize the existing capacity and resources of these organizations to streamline and accelerate project delivery. MPOs serve as a vital link between state and local governments and could play a larger role in aligning statewide objectives and resources with local needs. Similarly, Caltrans, with its vast right of way and expertise in engineering and project management, could expand its function to support a broader range of sustainable transportation initiatives, acting more as a public works entity delivering different kinds of transportation projects more regularly, such as rail, transit, and wildlife crossings. Some Task Force members expressed that a centralized state agency to lead and coordinate sustainable communities policy and implementation, would streamline implementation.

Funding for multi-modal transportation planning and project delivery is welcome and helpful, and funding could be re-engineered to achieve more sustainable community outcomes. Members pointed to the state funding programs for active transportation, affordable housing and transit capital as significant examples of successful implementation of the state's sustainable communities agenda (LEAP, REAP, REAP 2.0, ATP, TIRCP).[1] In particular, the two iterations of the Regional Early Action Planning Grants (REAP, REAP 2.0) provided meaningful, flexible funding tied specifically to implementing the regional plans that are aimed at sustainable communities. Additional successes include SB 960 (Wiener, 2024), which requires Caltrans to incorporate complete streets facilities into its Asset Management Plan and projects funded by the SHOPP. The legislation was described as an opportunity to use existing funds to concurrently meet a handful of goals, including safety, active transportation, and pavement condition. The Climate Action Plan for Transportation Infrastructure (CAPTI) has made progress on aligning the state's discretionary funds, but further work remains, and there are recognized legal limitations to realigning certain state and federal funds.

Some Task Force members voiced opinions that further changes to existing funding would be key for implementing sustainable communities within current fiscal constraints.

[1] LEAP = Local Early Action Planning grant program; REAP/REAP 2.0 = Regional Early Action Planning grant program; ATP = Active Transportation Program; TIRCP = Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program.

Statewide, aligning existing transportation funding with sustainable community goals has the potential for long-term impact.

Projects that move the needle on sustainable communities can be better prioritized for delivery. Many Task Force members discussed what it could look like for the state to "step up" on prioritizing and funding multimodal transportation needs, such as active transportation and transit operations. Beyond funding, the Task Force emphasized opportunities for streamlining the regulatory, institutional, legal, financial and construction landscape to allow multimodal projects to be delivered faster and more consistently, mentioning the fragmentation of transportation governance as a fundamental barrier. For building out transformative active transportation networks, sustainable funding was identified as a main opportunity.

Funding for sustainable community projects is often fragmented and siloed across numerous local, regional, state, and federal programs, each with distinct priorities, eligibility criteria, and reporting requirements. This structural separation means that projects frequently rely on a patchwork of funding sources, which complicates efforts to align resources toward shared sustainability goals. This fragmentation creates administrative complexity, slows project delivery, and makes it difficult to prioritize and implement transformative projects.

Some Task Force members noted contradictory policies and actions when it comes to implementation. Some noted that many transportation policy conversations are often about the need to manage vehicle travel demand and reduce VMT, but that the state departments yield to locals on individual highway projects that are forecasted to increase VMT. Task Force members also expressed uncertainty about the state's position on toll lanes. Members discussed how these ambiguities slow progress toward implementation.

Some members highlighted the enhanced role that the RTP/SCS could serve in guiding transportation investments. Some opined that state agencies, departments, and local transportation agencies should be required to follow the transportation project list in the RTP/SCS, which would help solve a paradox of transportation planning and delivery across multiple transportation institutions, and accelerate implementation of Sustainable Community Strategies. This policy position was codified in SB 1087 (Cabaldon, 2026) that was enacted during the timeframe of the SCTF.

New funding sources would be helpful for implementing sustainable communities. Many Task Force members discussed a need for new, sustainable funding sources to build out multimodal infrastructure. While existing programs—such as ATP—were cited as strong models, their effectiveness is curtailed by competitive grant structures that make long-term planning and consistent implementation difficult for local jurisdictions. Some Task Force members specifically noted that additional funding would enable California to accelerate community-scale walking and biking networks, strengthen multimodal transportation options, and more consistently implement safety, equity, and climate objectives. The Task Force members also discussed how a RUC would help meet the needs of the system by tying to actual road usage, which remains

stable even as gas tax revenues decline due to shifts in vehicle technology. Expanding funding beyond current sources was seen by some members as essential to overcome statutory barriers associated with existing funding sources, provide predictable and durable resources, and match funding with the scale of implementation needed to deliver sustainable community outcomes.

Pricing is a powerful tool for influencing travel behavior, as it can encourage more efficient use of transportation infrastructure and support broader sustainability goals. The addition of tolled lanes to the highway network has generally been feasible by tolling newly constructed lanes, rather than existing lanes. This approach has enabled regions to implement tolling where political challenges would otherwise make it difficult. But this approach has not resulted in VMT reduction, as new highway lanes generally induce VMT unless tolled at a price level to manage travel demand. Congestion pricing, in particular, was described by Task Force members as a mechanism with opportunity for managing local travel demand and traffic, and for obviating costly increases in roadway capacity to provide short-term congestion relief. By charging higher fees during peak periods or in congested areas, congestion pricing can improve traffic operations and improve reliability for drivers and transit (along with a host of other positive outcomes), while also generating a new source of transportation funding that could be used to fund transit services, among other needs. Many Task Force members noted that state leadership is crucial in establishing policy frameworks and fee-collecting mechanisms needed to support these various pricing strategies. It's important to ensure these strategies are implemented effectively and equitably across regions.

Recommendations for Improving Sustainable Communities Outcomes

Building on California's significant progress in advancing sustainable communities, CalSTA has identified opportunities to further strengthen implementation of the state's existing transportation, housing, and climate policies. These considerations are informed by discussions and recurring themes from Sustainable Communities Task Force (SCTF) meetings, the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies (ITS-Davis) memorandum, and the state's ongoing policy and implementation efforts.

These recommendations also recognize recent legislative progress, including the enactment of SB 1087, which modernizes California's Sustainable Communities Strategy framework and establishes an updated statutory foundation for regional transportation planning. Accordingly, the following recommendations are intended to complement and support implementation of the existing statutory and policy framework, strengthen coordination across state and regional efforts, and inform future opportunities to advance sustainable communities goals.

Organized around the common themes identified throughout the SCTF process, these considerations reflect CalSTA's synthesis of the Task Force's discussions and

supporting research, rather than formal consensus recommendations or positions adopted by the Task Force.

Strengthening coordination and performance measurement could support more effective sustainable communities implementation.

- *Explore, measure, and publish complementary performance measures to comprehensively capture sustainable communities outcomes.* California's climate planning and success is appropriately measured in GHG and VMT reduction. While GHG emissions and VMT remain central to California's climate and transportation goals, sustainable communities planning also advances broader objectives, including roadway safety, safe active transportation networks, walkability, affordability of housing, social and economic inclusion, transit accessibility, short distances between homes and destinations, economic development, and access to public spaces. The state should explore opportunities to better track and communicate these complementary outcomes. Doing so would provide opportunity to set short- and long-term goals and provide a more comprehensive picture of local and regional progress, in turn helping to inform investment and implementation decisions.

- *Designate a single state entity to coordinate interagency support and technical assistance for implementation of the sustainable communities policies.* Delivering projects that implement the state's sustainable community agenda requires coordination across multiple state agencies, including CARB, CTC, Caltrans, HCD, and SGC, each with distinct responsibilities related to planning, funding, and implementation. Building on existing agency roles and recent legislative reforms, including SB 1087, the state should designate a single entity to serve as a central point of coordination and technical assistance for local and regional partners as they deliver projects that further the state's climate, housing, and multimodal transportation goals. A central entity would facilitate coordination among relevant state agencies, provide guidance on applicable state processes and funding, and help project sponsors navigate implementation challenges. Establishing a centralized coordination function would streamline delivery, improve consistency and predictability, and better align state goals and resources with implementation actions.

Establish a shared vision and 'North Star' to guide transportation and land use policy and implementation.

- *Establish a clear, actionable vision to guide transportation planning and implementation.* California's transportation system advances multiple statewide priorities, including safety, mobility, housing, economic development, and climate objectives. While these priorities are reflected in existing state policies and planning frameworks, translating them into a clear, shared vision could help improve consistency in transportation planning, investment decisions, and project delivery. Building on existing statutory goals and recent reforms, the state should articulate a concise set of measurable objectives that transportation agencies and regional

partners can readily understand, apply, and measure. A shared vision would help align day-to-day decisions with broader sustainable communities goals, and provide a consistent framework for evaluating progress.

MPOs and state agencies have untapped potential to advance sustainable community goals.

- *Strengthen MPOs.* During SCS development, MPOs must balance state goals, resources, local priorities, and implementation realities. MPOs' role is to advise and plan for sustainable regional land use and hold the federal and state transportation funds used to back the projects in the SCS. Broadening their role in the SCS process to include decision-making capabilities on potential projects would lead to better regional integration, accelerated sustainable initiatives, and optimized local accountability.

- *Improve alignment between transportation investments and regional RTP/SCS priorities.* Transportation project priorities do not necessarily all align with regional climate targets or the SCS. While all transportation projects are currently required to be in an SCS, it may require the MPO to negotiate with various projects and priorities to achieve the overall GHG reduction target of the SCS. Requiring all transportation projects to align with a region's RTP/SCS takes the burden off the MPO to make the project fit and facilitates greater coordination towards achieving an SCS.

- *Expand Caltrans' role in delivering infrastructure.* Caltrans built and manages one of the largest and most complex transportation networks in the United States. Caltrans' focus has been on roadways. Leveraging its engineering and project delivery expertise for multimodal transportation projects would enhance capacity for construction in municipalities across the state and improve predictability of project delivery.

Improve coordination, predictability, and efficiency in transportation project prioritization and delivery.

- *Increase funding for the Active Transportation Program to meet demand.* The ATP is the state's primary funding for walking and biking infrastructure and plays an important role in advancing safety, mobility, and sustainable communities goals. Regions, locals, and advocates agree the program has created successful outcomes. However, demand for funding continues to far exceed available resources, limiting opportunities to develop connected active transportation networks. Accordingly, the state should prioritize additional ATP funding and explore opportunities to support sustained, long-term implementation of active transportation networks.

- *Align existing transportation funding with sustainable communities goals.* California has made significant progress toward integrating climate, equity, safety, housing, and public health considerations into transportation funding decisions through

initiatives such as the Climate Action Plan for Transportation Infrastructure (CAPTI) and SB 960 (Wiener, 2024). Building on these efforts, the state should strengthen coordination between existing policy and funding programs and identifying opportunities to better support regional transportation and sustainable communities priorities. These efforts should recognize the distinct purposes and eligibility requirements of existing funding programs while improving coordination and consistency in investment decisions, as well as opportunities to expand and scale these investments if additional resources are available.

- *Maximize the effectiveness and long-term fiscal sustainability of existing transit investments, with consideration of additional funding tied to scaling that progress and achieving defined outcomes.* Nearly all Task Force members agreed that a key strategy to meet the state's sustainable communities goals is a clear vision and durable resources for transit capital and operations. While the state has dedicated significant additional resources to transit in recent years, most new funding has been either one-time in nature or based on volatile revenue sources. A comprehensive strategy focused on transit planning and operations, with clearly defined goals and performance objectives for transit systems and matched with resources at the scale of ambition, would allow transit to serve its pivotal role for mobility, climate, and equity in the state. Funding that focuses on capital expansion is helpful, but funding is also needed for operations to maximize the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of existing capital investments.

Projects that move the needle on sustainable communities can be better prioritized for delivery.

- *Expedite multimodal project delivery.* Projects necessary to implement sustainable communities goals are complex and require coordination, funding, and approvals from many agencies at various levels of government for successful delivery. This complexity can inhibit and slow down or impede projects. With a centralized location to navigate state approvals, projects can be delivered more quickly and efficiently. The state should organize a central institution that can guide local and regional partners through the delivery process and assist their navigation through obstacles and various agencies. California has a model for this in the way that Caltrans assists local partners in planning, financing, permitting, and delivery of highway projects.

- *Provide clear, context-sensitive policies and criteria for evaluating highway expansion projects.* Highway expansion projects can induce additional vehicle travel, increasing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, certain expansion projects may be warranted to address safety, freight or other transportation needs. The lack of clear statewide policies governing highway expansion has created uncertainty for regional and local partners, complicating transportation planning, investment decisions, and project delivery. To better balance regional transportation needs with statewide climate and fiscal objectives, the state should establish clear, context-sensitive criteria and a transparent process for evaluating state- and locally initiated highway expansion projects on the State Highway System. This framework should also address legacy projects already in the

delivery pipeline, including projects that received environmental approval before the state's transition to VMT-based transportation impact analysis in 2020. Many of these projects were planned and evaluated under earlier policy frameworks, creating additional uncertainty about their continued advancement. Establishing clear expectations for both new and legacy projects would provide regional partners with greater predictability, support more informed prioritization in Regional Transportation Plans/Sustainable Communities Strategies (RTP/SCS) and programming, and better align transportation investments with statewide policy objectives.

- *Commit to a "fix-it-first" approach by prioritizing maintenance while evaluating capacity projects based on safety, mobility, and environmental impacts*. SB 1 (Beall, 2017) implemented a "fix-it first" policy, which requires state funding be prioritized for maintaining the existing transportation system before expanding it. SB1 as well as the SHOPP (the primary state program funding the highway system maintenance), however, fund projects that expand the system. With an ever-expanding transportation roadway network and SB 1 revenues facing long-term structural pressures, the state should prioritize maintaining and optimizing its existing transportation infrastructure over further expansion. This approach would support a more efficient and financially sustainable transportation network where the state lives within its means.

Maximize existing investments and identify opportunities to address sustainable communities funding and implementation needs.

- *Clear, dedicated funding for sustainable communities*. Realigning funding is one necessary component of implementation, as outlined in CAPTI, given the relative magnitude of transportation funding; but, realigning funding has limits under current statute. New funding was also identified by Task Force members as a necessary component to implement a sustainable communities agenda. The Regional Early Action Program, Active Transportation Program, Transformative Climate Communities and the Affordable Housing Sustainable Communities programs are dedicated funding sources for sustainable communities, but are consistently oversubscribed and fluctuate between funding cycles. While many other programs support sustainable community goals, including the Solutions for Congested Corridors Program and the already-mentioned ATP, these are dedicated transportation programs that support sustainable community goals incidentally, rather than by design. Dedicated funding has been successful in the past to achieve sustainable community outcomes. The state should organize and implement SCS outcomes-oriented programs that rapidly fund implementation of plans for regional-scale, protected walking and biking networks. These funding sources should be aligned with consistent metrics of sustainable communities.

- *Strengthen long-term planning and funding strategies for transportation infrastructure resilience.* California's transportation infrastructure faces increasing exposure to wildfires, flooding, landslides, and other climate-related hazards, placing growing pressure on existing maintenance and rehabilitation resources. Approximately 15% of the SHS is located in a FEMA floodzone, 75% of the system

is exposed to wildfire, and nearly 50% of the system is exposed to some level of landslide[58]. Between FY23-24 and FY 25-26 Caltrans reserved $1.*05* billion in SHOPP funding for disasters and emergency response. Over that same period, Caltrans spent $2.81 billion in disaster and emergency-related projects - more than twice the planned amount. This is a significant amount of funding, and the effects of climate change on the SHS are only projected to increase. At a minimum, the state should strengthen coordination of existing climate adaptation, emergency response, and transportation funding programs while prioritizing proactive investments that reduce infrastructure vulnerability and long-term recovery costs. Building on existing resilience initiatives, the state should assess projected infrastructure needs, identify gaps in available resources, and evaluate sustainable funding strategies to support disaster preparedness, system resilience, and recovery. These efforts should emphasize cost-effective risk reduction and preservation of existing transportation assets while minimizing the diversion of resources from planned maintenance and other transportation priorities. Any further conversation about additional transportation revenue should include an explicit discussion of meeting the growing need for resilience and disaster response while maintaining valuable investments in safety, multimodal infrastructure, and other state priorities.

Pricing is a powerful tool for managing travel behavior, as it can encourage more efficient use of transportation infrastructure and support broader sustainability goals.

- *Provide state guidance and technical assistance on regional transportation pricing strategies.* Sustainable Communities Task Force participants identified pricing strategies as potential tools to manage congestion, improve system efficiency, reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and meeting funding needs. For example, various pricing strategies have been included in multiple SCS' as mechanisms to reduce GHGs and as a new source of funding for transportation. The state should provide a statewide policy framework for roadway pricing, including greater clarity about existing authorities and future opportunities for regions and local governments interested in implementing transportation pricing strategies. This could include technical assistance to support the development of pricing frameworks tailored to regional and local contexts.

Conclusion

The CalSTA Sustainable Communities Task Force report underscores the urgent need for California to bridge the gap between its ambitious climate, housing, and transportation goals and the complex realities of implementation. Despite progress through state policies, funding programs, and collaborative efforts, the state continues to face significant challenges in reducing transportation GHGs, increasing housing affordability and supply, and improving transportation safety and equity. The report suggests consideration of a unified mission, expanded performance measures, the role of existing state and regional agencies, and new, dedicated funding sources to accelerate sustainable community outcomes. By embracing these ideas for further

exploration and fostering stronger alignment across agencies and programs, California can advance toward healthier, more equitable, and resilient communities that meet both present and future needs.

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