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Taxpayers Educational Foundation Peer Review Finds SANDAG RTP Rational but Risky SANDAG RTP Data and Assumptions Generally Sound, But Significant Risks in Future Finance

San Diego, CA (January 20, 2022) – The San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation (Foundation) announces the publishing of its independent review of the underlying data, methodologies, and assumptions used to build the San Diego Association of Government’s recently approved Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). While this panel of interested analysts and transportation experts assesses that the RTP was developed in a reasonably sound manner, the public should be aware of the significant risks in future finance that will impact SANDAG’s ability to complete the plan as approved. The report also includes a review of the regressivity or progressivity of various taxes or fees, like vehicle miles traveled.

The Foundation is the research and educational arm of the San Diego County Taxpayers Association, a 76-year old civic institution that fights for effective and efficient municipal government. The Association established the Foundation as an independent entity so its membership and the general public could benefit from access to independent and objective studies of public policy matters. The Foundation regularly convenes the regional community of public policy practitioners, educators, and artists who want to study issues objectively and facilitate civility and citizenship in public policy discussions.

It is in that spirit that the Foundation established over six months ago a working group of local transportation professionals and thoughtful policy analysts and researchers to conduct an independent review of the underlying data, methodologies, and assumptions built into the SANDAG RTP. The review was extensive, but still intended to provide taxpayers a simplified and salient understanding of a significantly complex plan.

“If you’re like most residents in our region juggling a full plate of work and family responsibilities and don’t have the time to go to SANDAG meetings or wade through tens of thousands of pages, we want to help you get the information you need,” said Haney Hong, president and trustee of the Foundation.

“Before you decide to vote on any future tax or fee to pay for this plan, you want to know what’s in the plan. You might be asking: how did they tackle teleworking? Did they get information from people who speak in my language? What do they assume about jobs and inflation?”

“No one has a crystal ball and can tell the future with fine precision, and certainly we should not expect that of the professionals at SANDAG,” said Hong. “That said, we should all be upfront about where there are risks and sensitivities in the plan.”

This working group ultimately determined that the plan was developed in a reasonable way. The review considered what data fed into the computer models and the methods the computer models used to lay out potential transportation demand. Furthermore, the review went extensively through the various planning assumptions that are necessary to make to build the plan and to project out potential costs.

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“If you set sail on a course one-degree different today, it won’t make much of a difference in the near term,” said Dr. Ali Freedman, research and technical director at the Foundation. “But over years, small differences can add up to become big, and we want to make sure the public is aware where those big risks may potentially arise.”

The Foundation’s most significant concern is in the surety of various local, state, and federal funding sources that require votes of the people or Congressional action, which is becoming increasingly hard to achieve. The RTP, because it does not connect specific funding sources to specific elements of the plan, has significant risk if any one of the projected future revenue streams do not get realized. The plan does not prioritize its various projects, so should that risk occur, the SANDAG board in the future will face choices to have to support projects for some communities over others.

“At SANDAG, we strive to put out information the public can trust. We are tasked with the important job of planning for regional growth and ensuring our transportation infrastructure adequately supports that growth” said Hasan Ikhata, Executive Director of SANDAG. “When research organizations like the SDTEF take a deep dive into our data and evaluate its accuracy with a critical eye, our region is stronger and the people can have more confidence in our leadership.”

While the underlying data, methods, and assumptions in the RTP are generally reasonable, the Foundation assesses there are significant risks that we need to acknowledge today. The San Diego region should not be surprised in future years to see a repeat of what we see today, where different communities in the region were unaware of the risks accepted years ago and then express disappointment that projects in their neighborhood did not come to fruition.

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The San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation supports the San Diego County Taxpayers Association and the general taxpaying public with in-depth research and educational programming for community leaders and civil servants. The Foundation convenes the regional community of public policy practitioners, educators, and artists who want to study issues objectively and to facilitate civility and citizenship in public policy discussions. The Foundation also administers the new Public Regional Outcomes Standards Board (PROS Board), which sets generally-accepted rules and methods for our region in reporting public good outcomes.