

San Francisco Adopts New CEQA Transportation Impact Measure

San Francisco Planning Commission adopts resolution to immediately update the environmental review process

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SAN FRANCISCO – The San Francisco Planning Commission voted 6-0 today to adopt a resolution to move forward with state-proposed guidelines that modernize the way city officials measure the transportation impacts of new development.

For decades, environmental analysis of transportation impacts focused on how quickly cars moved through a given intersection, a flawed approach that was expensive to calculate, did little to benefit the environment and promoted urban sprawl rather than smart infill growth. The new approach is more comprehensive, looking at the method of travel, how far the person is going, and how many other people are in the vehicle to determine the impact on the environment.

The commission voted to remove automobile delay as a significant impact on the environment and replace it with a vehicle miles traveled threshold for all California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, environmental determinations. The resolution, put forward by San Francisco Planning, allows San Francisco to immediately implement changes to how it analyzes environmental impacts of development and transportation projects rather than wait for state adoption.

“Vehicle miles traveled is a much smarter approach to identifying the direct environmental effects of car use,” said John Rahaim, Director of San Francisco Planning. “It will streamline CEQA review for projects that are designed to encourage public transit, promote pedestrian safety and help reduce the need for traveling long distances by car. This is tremendous progress for San Francisco, and ultimately the State of California. We are pleased to be the first city in California to adopt these new guidelines.”

“San Francisco stands with the State Office of Planning and Research in embracing this forward-thinking approach to environmental review,” said Scott Wiener, Chair of the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, which serves as the county Congestion Management Agency and leads environmental review of major projects like the Doyle Drive rebuild, Van Ness Avenue Bus Rapid Transit and Geary Bus Rapid Transit. “I applaud the Planning Department for its action and look forward to the Transportation Authority’s use of the new Vehicle Miles Traveled measure as well, further aligning San Francisco’s CEQA practices with our city’s overall environmental, transportation and development policy goals.”

The state’s proposed guidelines are part of the implementation of Senate Bill 743. Effective September 2013, SB 743 directed the California Office of Planning and Research, or OPR, to prepare revisions to the CEQA

Guidelines to establish criteria for determining the significance of transportation impacts that “promote the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the development of multimodal transportation networks, and a diversity of land uses.” Since then, OPR has published three documents to implement SB 743. The third document, Revised Proposal on Updates to the CEQA Guidelines on Evaluating Transportation Impacts in CEQA, was published for public review and comment in January 2016.

Passed in 1970, CEQA does not directly regulate land use, but it requires local agencies to follow a specific protocol of analysis to identify the potential environmental impacts of a proposed project and to avoid or alleviate those impacts through development of project alternatives, mitigation measures, and monitoring. While in most cases CEQA is effective in protecting the environment from man-made impacts, its traffic-impact analysis is exceedingly out of date.

“As San Francisco develops new policies and programs to encourage infill development and transportation projects that provide more flexibility and connectivity, the current environmental review standards have continued to stay in the past,” said Sarah Bernstein Jones, Director of Environmental Planning. “Moving on from level of service means moving toward a more modern and effective process that aligns the City’s actions with the state’s policy goals of smart growth. I’m proud of our City for being a leader in this effort, and I encourage other cities and counties to do the same.”

“San Francisco is once again proving itself to be at the forefront of environmental progress and a champion of smart growth,” said Mayor Edwin Lee. “As we continue to create safer streets that are designed for pedestrians, public transit and other road users, I have no doubt that the rest of the State will follow San Francisco’s lead in smart urban growth policies.”

“After over a decade of policy development and technical study in partnership with the city and State, we are thrilled to now have the opportunity to implement this landmark CEQA reform,” said Tilly Chang, Transportation Authority Executive Director. “The new methodology properly credits transportation and development projects that promote sustainability and is a much-needed boost to climate protection efforts across the state.”

Guidelines currently measure the transportation impacts of a new building or transportation project by something called vehicular “level of service,” or LOS. Developed in the 1950s by traffic engineers primarily for analyzing traffic capacity on highways as opposed to environmental effects, LOS is a time consuming and expensive process that primarily considers car traffic as an environmental impact, measured by how many cars pass through an intersection in a given time and whether it will cause driving delay. The standard method to mitigate such impacts has historically been to widen streets or build new ones, leading to increased greenhouse gas emissions and prioritizing vehicular speed over pedestrian safety. In protecting a car dependent transportation system and lower density development that adds more cars to the transportation system, this kind of analysis encourages sprawl development.

“This modernized approach represents a more holistic way to analyze impacts while encouraging safe public transit, walking and biking,” said Ed Reiskin, Director of Transportation at the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. “Our residents, workers and visitors want meaningful improvements to the transportation system, like reliable transit pathways, safer streets for people walking and better bikeways. Today’s changes will help the SFMTA deliver more, better, faster. That results in better transportation choices for everyone.”

OPR’s proposed changes to the guidelines recommend replacing automobile delay as described by level of service with a vehicle miles traveled criteria. Vehicle miles traveled, also known as VMT, measures the amount and distance that a project might lead people to drive, including the number of passengers within a vehicle, rather than the congestion it creates at an intersection. The use of the Transportation Authority’s state-of-the-art travel demand forecasting model, SF-CHAMP, provides a strong technical backing to calculate VMT for environmental review within San Francisco. The robust approach of San Francisco’s overall technical team has helped shape the State’s proposal and is a resource for other jurisdictions seeking to implement this change in practice.

The resolution to take immediate action represents the Align component of a three-part citywide policy initiative to help transportation keep pace with growth in the city. The initiative, known as the Transportation Sustainability Program, is a joint effort by the Mayor's Office, the San Francisco Planning Department, the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. It is designed to improve and expand the transportation system to help accommodate new growth and create a policy framework for private development to contribute to minimizing its impact on the transportation system, including helping to pay for the system's enhancement and expansion.

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The San Francisco Planning Department, under the direction of the Planning Commission, plays a central role in shaping the future of our City by generating an extraordinary vision for the General Plan and in neighborhood plans; fostering exemplary design through planning controls; improving our surroundings through environmental analysis; preserving our unique heritage; encouraging a broad range of housing and a diverse job base; and enforcing the Planning Code. For more information, visit sfplanning.org.

Established by voter proposition in 1999, the SFMTA, a department of the City and County of San Francisco, oversees the Municipal Railway (Muni), parking and traffic, bicycling, walking and taxis. With five modes of transit, Muni has approximately 700,000 passenger boardings each day. Over 1 million people get around this city each day and rely on the SFMTA to ensure safe and reliable travel by transit, walking, bicycling, taxi and driving.

The San Francisco County Transportation Authority conducts long-range planning and allocates funding for transportation projects in San Francisco. The Transportation Authority administers the city's half-cent transportation sales tax, serves as the city's Congestion Management Agency and is the designated Treasure Island Mobility Management Agency. The Transportation Authority Board consists of the 11 members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, who act as Transportation Authority Commissioners. Commissioner Scott Wiener is Chair of the Board. Tilly Chang is the Transportation Authority's Executive Director.