

CONNECT SOCAL 2024

The 2024–2050 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy
of the Southern California Association of Governments

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION & CONSULTATION SCAG Connect SoCal Community Partner Program: Focus Group Memo

APPENDIX 2 OF 5

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Public Participation & Consultation

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SCAG Connect SoCal 2024 Community Partner Program Focus Group Memo

I. INTRODUCTION

In November and December 2023, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) engaged the staff of 16 community-based organizations (CBOs) in three focus groups to obtain feedback on the Connect SoCal 2024 draft plan and Connect SoCal engagement overall.¹ CBOs (“Community Partners”) were part of the Connect SoCal 2024 Community Partner Program and conducted outreach to their communities from mid-April to late May to inform the plan development. The Community Partner focus groups served as spaces for SCAG to share updates on the Connect SoCal 2024 draft plan and for CBOs to share how the policies and strategies under the plan’s four pillars—Mobility, Community, Environment, and Economy—addressed feedback from community members.² Each focus group took place virtually and included a SCAG-led presentation on the draft plan and a discussion about the plan elements and opportunities for continued community engagement. Community Partners also completed a feedback survey to share more detailed input on the Connect SoCal 2024 Community Partners Program (see Appendix for feedback survey quantitative results). This memo summarizes input from the focus groups and the feedback survey.

II. FEEDBACK ON COMMUNITY PARTNER PROGRAM

Community Partners provided robust input on the Community Partner Program through the focus groups and the feedback survey. Overall, Community Partners appreciated both the opportunity to engage their communities on Connect SoCal 2024 and the support from SCAG and the consultant team. However, they also identified some areas where SCAG could improve the program to better support CBO outreach. These suggestions included extending the outreach timeframe, tailoring materials to each community, facilitating more inclusive engagement, adjusting the reporting and billing timelines, and engaging community members more regularly.

¹ The first focus group session was held on November 15, a second session was held on November 29, and a makeup session was held on December 6 for partners who were unable to attend the first two sessions.

² Due to time constraints, focus group participants voted for the top one to two pillars to discuss during their session. None of the sessions prioritized Economy, so this memo does not discuss feedback on that pillar.

SUCSESSES:

- **Community Partners appreciated the opportunity to engage their communities through Connect SoCal.** Community Partners acknowledged the value of conducting outreach to their communities on key issues as part of Connect SoCal. CBOs also overwhelmingly noted that they would engage with SCAG in the future. In the feedback survey, all respondents indicated that they were either likely or very likely to engage in future SCAG outreach partnerships (Appendix A). Moreover, CBOs also shared that community members felt valued and engaged through the CBO-led outreach. Many CBOs shared that community members appreciated the opportunity to learn about SCAG and its work and to provide input that would inform future policies, though CBOs added that community members would also appreciate more clarity on how SCAG utilizes their feedback to develop the plan.
- **CBOs found the Community Partner Program process to be clear and supportive.** CBOs overwhelmingly found that the scope of work and reporting requirements for the Connect SoCal Community Partner Program were clear. In the feedback survey, over 90% of Community Partners indicated that the program was either easy or very easy to participate in (Appendix B). CBOs also identified several elements of the process that supported their ability to conduct outreach. Supportive elements included the SCAG-provided slide decks and outreach materials and timely responses to questions from SCAG and the consultant team. CBOs added that it was helpful that outreach materials and slide decks were customizable for each topic or event. CBOs also appreciated the flexibility and autonomy to decide which events to attend or groups to connect with and how to present to their community to meet their scope of work requirements. Community Partners further identified some areas where the program could better support CBOs, which are discussed in the next section.

CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- **Community Partners needed more time to conduct and prepare outreach.** The compressed timeframe for outreach, which also took place during a busy season for many CBOs (mid-April to late May), impacted how many residents Community Partners were able to engage and the quality of the feedback they collected. Overall, the short outreach timeframe made it challenging for some CBOs to plan their own Connect SoCal events, and several CBOs did not complete this portion of their scope of work as a result. Further, due to the limited outreach window and reduced lead time, CBOs sometimes had trouble reserving enough space on community meeting agendas to share an update on Connect SoCal and collect robust feedback. These challenges were compounded by the fact that outreach took place during a busy period for some communities, meaning that community agendas were sometimes fully booked. To address these challenges, Community Partners emphasized the need for a longer outreach period in future rounds of Connect SoCal engagement. As part of this, CBOs requested that materials be available farther in advance and that there be time

for CBOs to co-develop or provide feedback on the materials before SCAG finalizes them.

- **The Connect SoCal CBO outreach materials were useful but could have been better tailored to target audiences.** Community Partners found the customizable outreach materials and presentations to be particularly helpful for their engagement; however, CBOs also noted that more targeted materials would have facilitated better feedback from community members. CBOs shared that the slide decks were long and often required extensive explanation due to the complexity of the concepts presented and the fact that many residents were learning about SCAG and its work for the first time. They added that the survey was too long and often required more time than participants were willing to dedicate, particularly at outdoor festivals in the hot sun. Lastly, they noted that the materials, especially those in languages other than English, often used technical terms, which required more explanation or translation from CBO staff. Therefore, Community Partners recommended that SCAG produce shorter materials that are more tailored to community members and avoid jargon. As part of this, SCAG may consider adapting the slide deck to each county so that the information is more applicable to residents. This may include adding more background on specific issues and providing examples to ground the policies in community members' day-to-day lives. Community Partners also suggested that SCAG provide materials in more languages to make them accessible to more residents.
- **Community Partners found it challenging to explain SCAG's work and authority to community members.** Community Partners reported that residents often had never heard of SCAG and wanted to know more about the agency's function in the region as a result. While some Community Partners seemed to have an adequate understanding of SCAG's jurisdiction, others shared that it would have been helpful to have more training on this topic to better field questions from community members. As part of this, Community Partners shared that SCAG could provide more information on its role in the CBO training or in the outreach slide deck to provide CBOs and community members with a foundational understanding of the agency.
- **SCAG should adopt several strategies to make Connect SoCal outreach and engagement more inclusive.** Community members suggested that SCAG make Connect SoCal engagement more inclusive through several strategies that would also help the agency reach more residents. These strategies include hosting SCAG workshops in community sites and conducting meetings at existing community events to meet residents where they are. SCAG should also provide more stipends and childcare at community meetings and events to incentivize and support participation. Lastly, CBOs called for more targeted outreach to the unhoused, youth, and Indigenous communities to gather more robust feedback from these groups.
- **Community Partners shared that the reporting and reimbursement timelines should be adjusted to better support CBO operations.** Community Partners shared

that the timelines for reporting and payment compounded the capacity and financial challenges that many CBOs face when working with public agencies. To meet SCAG's reporting requirements before the end of the fiscal year, CBOs had to submit their feedback summaries by the last day of the outreach period. CBOs noted that this short timeline was challenging to meet and that they needed more time to submit feedback reports after the outreach period ended. In addition, CBOs noted that payment disbursements took a long time, which created financial pressure since the program was conducted on a reimbursement basis. As a result, Community Partners suggested that SCAG build more time for CBO reporting into the project timeline and expedite CBO payments to better support their operations.

- **SCAG should engage community members more regularly than once every four years.** Community Partners shared that they would like SCAG to conduct more regular community engagement related to Connect SoCal, not just every four years. They suggested that this outreach could start with funding CBOs to provide their communities with an update on the draft and final Connect SoCal 2024 plan and to report on progress between plan cycles. This engagement would help community members become more familiar with SCAG and its role in the region. Community Partners also suggested that SCAG develop a CBO-specific newsletter with updates that CBOs can share with their communities.

III. COMMUNITY PARTNER FEEDBACK ON CONNECT SOCAL 2024 DRAFT PLAN

Community Partners had many suggestions for areas where the Connect SoCal 2024 draft plan could more specifically address pressing community concerns. While they appreciated that the policies and strategies addressed many of the issues raised through outreach (e.g. street safety, 15-minute communities, air and water quality, and housing affordability), Community Partners were concerned about the lack of specificity around how SCAG plans to work with jurisdictions to alleviate these issues. They also wanted the draft plan to have more urgency surrounding the challenges that residents are facing, which can have traumatic impacts on their daily lives. Overall, Community Partners advocated for increased urgency around the housing affordability crisis; greater acknowledgement of the connections between issues such as environmental justice and housing affordability; and more pedestrian, bicycle, and transit investments.

The following sections summarize how the draft plan addresses feedback within each Connect SoCal 2024 pillar—Mobility, Communities, Environment, and Economy—and areas for improvement.

a. Mobility – Build and maintain a robust transportation network.

HOW THE DRAFT PLAN ADDRESSES COMMUNITY FEEDBACK:

- **Community Partners appreciated that the draft plan prioritizes safety.** Community Partners shared that the draft plan addressed the feedback they heard from their communities about mobility-related safety issues. They re-emphasized that safety, especially related to traffic fatalities, is a major concern among community members, particularly those who walk or bike.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- **Community Partners wanted to see more of an emphasis on pedestrian, bicycle, and transit infrastructure.** Community Partners felt the draft plan could have a stronger emphasis on infrastructure for transit riders, pedestrians, and cyclists, not just drivers. One Community Partner shared that community members questioned the effectiveness of complete streets that do not substantially separate pedestrians and bicyclists from car traffic and emphasized the need for physical barriers between vehicles and other modes. Another uplifted that continued investment in car infrastructure (including for electric vehicles) does not address the public health impacts and racial inequities of car-focused transportation. One other noted that the SCAG region covers many different types of urban, suburban, and rural areas and that the framing of bike and pedestrian safety policies should acknowledge these differences.
- **Reliability and frequency of public transit continued to be a top priority.** Community Partners emphasized that transit reliability needs to be a strong focus in the draft plan, given its importance to community members and its potential to address many of the plan's goals. Transit improvements would support many low-income community members who rely on transit as their main form of transportation. Prioritizing transit reliability and frequency could also help widen the pool of people who ride transit.
- **Community Partners emphasized the need for more transportation discounts for low-income residents.** Community Partners expressed support for policies such as fare-free transit and other mobility discounts that support low-income travelers and wanted SCAG to get more involved in these issues. CBOs added that these discounts should be uniform across mobility programs to ensure that low-income residents can easily access them.

b. Communities – Develop, connect, and sustain communities that are livable and thriving.

HOW THE DRAFT PLAN ADDRESSES COMMUNITY FEEDBACK:

- **Community Partners were hopeful that the 15-minute communities policy could help address spatial inequities in the region.** Community Partners were excited about the potential for 15-minute communities to reduce vehicle miles traveled and address spatial inequities in the distribution of neighborhood resources. Several Community Partners also shared that their neighborhoods are already 15-minute communities. Some viewed neighborhoods that are already 15-minute communities as low-hanging fruit for improvements as part of the policies and strategies outlined in the draft plan.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- **The Communities policy language in the draft plan lacks specificity and urgency related to some of the region’s most pressing issues.** Community Partners encouraged SCAG to emphasize the urgency of the housing crisis in the region, given its centrality to many residents’ lives. They also called for the draft plan to provide more specifics about ways that SCAG can advance supportive policies like rent control and services for the unhoused community, while acknowledging the agency’s limited role. These participants were concerned that high-level terminology, such as “programs to reduce housing burden,” would not effectively address these critical issues. In acknowledging SCAG’s limited role, Community Partners suggested that SCAG develop more pilot programs and support innovative policy in this area.
- **The draft plan should more directly connect housing and mobility issues.** Community Partners noted the connections between housing and mobility, including the fact that the housing crisis has contributed to higher numbers of unhoused residents on transit. Participants called for the plan’s strategies to emphasize these connections, for example by highlighting the reductions in vehicle miles traveled from 15-minute communities with neighborhood services, especially for more rural areas.
- **The draft plan should focus more on older populations and intergenerational spaces and activities.** Community Partners highlighted the need for more emphasis on the region’s senior population in the plan, particularly due to the vulnerability of this group to housing instability and climate threats. As part of this, participants wanted to see more consideration for caregivers and increased spaces for intergenerational activities.

c. Environment – Create a healthy region for the people of today and tomorrow.

HOW THE DRAFT PLAN ADDRESSES COMMUNITY FEEDBACK:

- **Community Partners felt that the draft plan acknowledged community concerns around air pollution and water quality.** Community Partners appreciated the focus on air and water quality in the Environment pillar of the draft plan. They re-emphasized the importance of these environmental issues given the centrality of water to climate resilience and the impacts of air pollution in the region.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- **The draft plan should have a stronger emphasis on environmental justice throughout the Environment policies and strategies.** Community Partners highlighted the need to emphasize environmental justice throughout this section. This includes more directly emphasizing the impact of freeway pollution on disadvantaged communities and the need for better parks access within a 15-minute walk of more residents. As part of this, they called for more specific environmental justice metrics, which can help make the case for change.
- **There needs to be more specificity around how Connect SoCal will advance and align with existing environmental efforts.** Community Partners highlighted that the draft plan is missing the “how” related to air pollution reduction and water protection. More specifically, they want to see more information on how SCAG will coordinate with existing plans, such as Natural Lands and 30x30 policies, to advance environmental goals. Community Partners also called for a toolkit or best practice guide on major policies, such as decarbonization, to support cities with implementation.
- **The draft plan should identify areas where SCAG can partner with Indigenous communities in the region.** In addition to ensuring that SCAG collects feedback from Indigenous communities through Connect SoCal, Community Partners also emphasized the importance of partnering with Indigenous communities, especially for climate-related work. CBOs called for SCAG to collaborate with these groups to develop and implement policies and programs in the Environment pillar and suggested more specificity about SCAG’s approach to this in the draft plan.
- **The draft plan should more directly address several key environmental issues.** Community members highlighted several climate issues that they felt should be more fully addressed in the plan. These included water quality, stormwater management, water re-wilding, LA River revitalization, urban greening, habitats and open space, oil well capping, and carbon-free power such as solar.

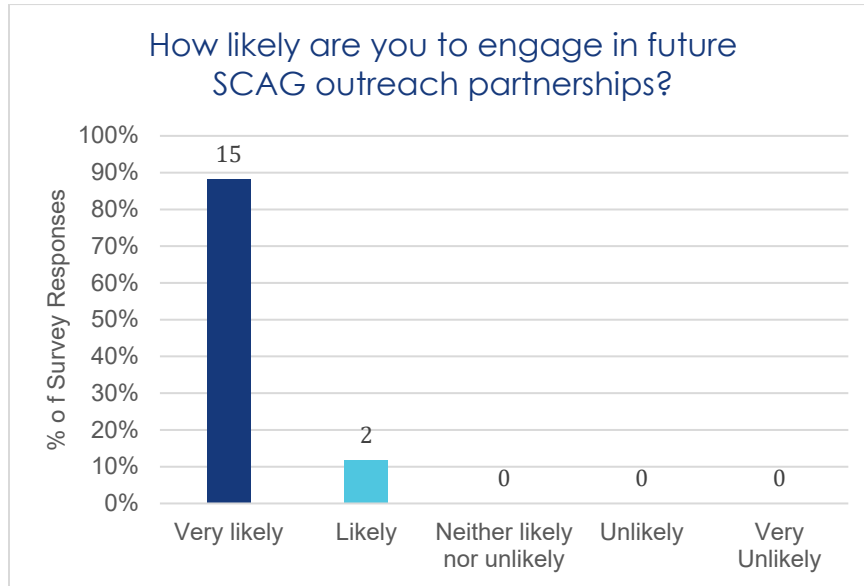
- **The draft plan should draw more connections between the Environment pillar and other critical issues such as housing affordability.** Community Partners noted that there are connections between environmental and housing issues that the draft plan should address more directly. They uplifted that there can often be tension between environmental policies, such as decarbonization and conservation, and housing priorities. Specifically, they shared concerns about how environmental policies can be used to stall housing development and how housing and conservation goals can sometimes seem at odds. As a result, Community Partners wanted SCAG to draw more attention to the connections between the Environment and Communities pillars in the draft plan.

d. Economy – Support a sustainable, efficient, and productive regional economic environment that provides opportunities for all residents.

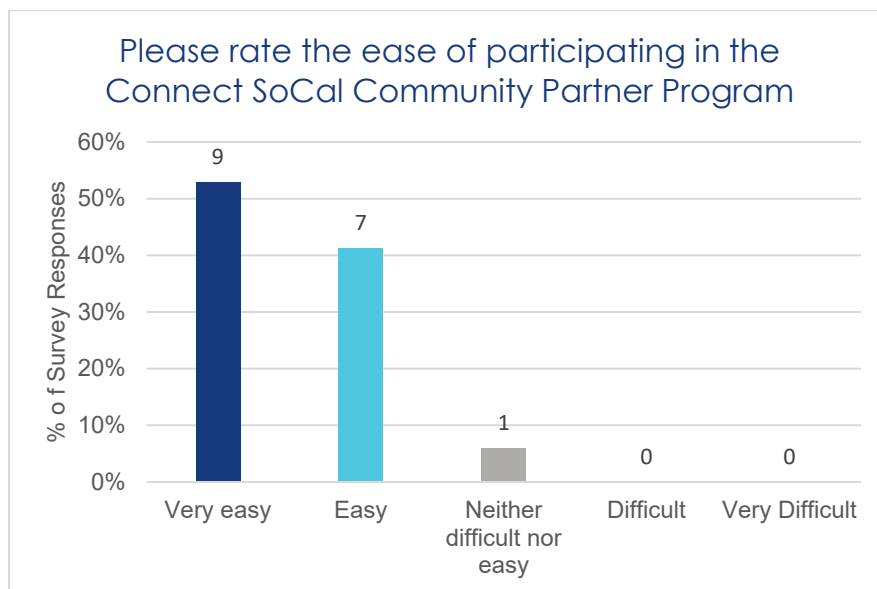
Due to limited time during the focus groups, Community Partners voted on the top one to two pillars for discussion ahead of each session. Focus group participants did not prioritize the Economy pillar for discussion in any of the three sessions. Participants also did not share any feedback on this pillar via email or in the feedback survey. Therefore, this memo does not include a summary of feedback on this topic.

IV. APPENDIX – COMMUNITY PARTNER PROGRAM FEEDBACK SURVEY QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

a. Likelihood of Engaging in Future SCAG Outreach Partnerships



b. Ease of Participating in the Community Partner Program







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