
Press Release

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Greg Pettis Reflects on His Year As SCAG President: Regional Priorities Have Never Been More Interconnected

INDIAN WELLS – Economic well-being. Sustainability. Quality of living. In Southern California, all roads lead to effective transportation policy, and as his 12-month tenure as president of the nation’s largest metropolitan planning organization draws to a close, Greg Pettis says our regional priorities have never been more interconnected.

“If people can’t get to where they’re going, everything stops,” says Pettis, a Cathedral City council member whose term as President of the Southern California Association of Governments officially ends during SCAG’s Regional Conference & General Assembly May 1-2 in Indian Wells. “When the state required us to do sustainable communities strategies as part of our regional planning, it really opened our eyes to the fact that there was more happening in Southern California than just transportation.”

During the past year, SCAG committed to solutions in reducing poverty in collaboration with other leaders and stakeholders and has been a leading voice in extending California’s film tax credits, the need for a federal freight policy and fixing the Highway Trust Fund, which is projected to run out of money by this fall. As SCAG begins work on its 2016-2040 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy, Pettis believes there is a great opportunity to address a multitude of problems all at once.

“Transportation has a hand in everything else,” he says. “I think we’ve now forced ourselves to stop and say, ‘Wow, we’ve got to get a handle on all of these issues.’”

At the top of that list is poverty. A study released by SCAG last December showed that between 1990 and 2012, the share of residents in the six-county region who were living below the federal poverty level rose from 13 percent to 18 percent, and that today, one in every four children live in poverty.

Pettis says investment in transportation infrastructure can play a major role in creating economic opportunity. SCAG’s 2012-2035 RTP/SCS identified more than \$524 billion in transportation-related investments, which would create – directly and indirectly – more than 500,000 jobs per year and yield a return of \$2.90 for every dollar spent.

He praises the Obama Administration’s inclusion of \$10 billion over the next four years toward a national freight policy, and points to SCAG’s involvement in Congressional field hearings and its leadership in groups such as the Coalition for America’s Gateways and Trade Corridors as major drivers in raising awareness among lawmakers and others.

“To have a dedicated freight fund is huge when you consider that close to 70 percent of the nation’s freight comes out of Southern California,” Pettis says. “When you consider the amount of cargo that

comes through the Ports of Long Beach, Los Angeles and Hueneme, and the border crossing in Calexico, this is a major issue not just for California, but for the nation as a whole.”

Fixing the Highway Trust Fund, meanwhile, remains a serious challenge.

“We need to increase the gas tax (which has not had a rate adjustment since 1993), but we also have to look at new ways to raise revenues. Whether it’s vehicle miles traveled, or container fees, we need to find a new mechanism,” Pettis says. Praising SCAG’s leadership in raising public awareness of the problem, he says elected leaders need to have open minds and “not take anything off the table because it doesn’t sound right or didn’t work 10 years ago.”

Regarding high-speed rail, Pettis says he believes the commitment exists in Sacramento and Washington to see it through, and that local policy makers will support it as long as the needs and concerns of Northern and Southern California are addressed equitably.

“I firmly believe we will have high-speed rail in California,” he says.

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About SCAG

SCAG is the nation’s largest metropolitan planning organization, representing six counties, 191 cities and more than 18 million residents. SCAG undertakes a variety of planning and policy initiatives to plan for a livable and sustainable Southern California now and in the future. For more information about SCAG’s regional efforts, please visit www.scag.ca.gov.