San Diego Association of Governments
Borders Committee: Cross Border
Cooperative Planning

Quick Information

Agency: San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)
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Website: http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?committeeid=54&fuseaction=committees.detail
Cooperation Topic(s): Congestion Management; Economic Development; Regional Planning
Cooperation Practice(s): Project Partnerships
Cost Information: Partner agencies share funds and staff for joint projects; SANDAG dedicates funds for staff positions

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) Borders Committee acts as a forum for collaboration with Mexico; Imperial, Riverside, and Orange Counties; and 18 Federally-recognized Tribes. In a time when agencies are expected to do more work, more quickly with scarce time and resources, the Borders Committee and its partner agencies have managed to share funds and staff to jointly plan projects of mutual interest.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

SANDAG’s focus on cross-border planning stems in part from its unique location. In addition to sharing borders with three economically important counties, San Diego County borders with Mexico and includes 18 cities, the County government, and 18 Federally-recognized Tribes. Close proximity to diverse neighbors with whom the San Diego region shares water and energy resources and cross-border commuting patterns requires coordination on planning projects. Mexico’s long-standing representation as an advisory member on the SANDAG Board of Directors since the 1970s reflects this history of cooperation. SANDAG has long collaborated with its neighbors, but in 2001, it recognized the need to better address cross-border challenges and established the Borders Committee, a body of elected officials that represent the SANDAG region. To focus its coordination efforts, the Borders Committee oversees the Borders Program, which categorizes collaboration into binational, interregional, and government-to-government relations with Tribal Nations in San Diego County.

Figure 23. Bridge on the South Bay Expressway, a 10-mile toll road that helps link San Diego’s highway network with Otay Mesa, the region’s main commercial Port of Entry. Source: SANDAG
Collaboration Structure and Process

The Borders Committee is one of five policy committees that provides input and recommendations to the SANDAG Board of Directors. The Borders Committee, which includes representatives outside SANDAG, meets monthly and receives input from the Committee on Binational Regional Opportunities and the Tribal Transportation Working Group. These technical working groups focus on topics of common interest, including transportation, economic development, housing, environment, and land use.

The Borders Committee has also created ad hoc committees to facilitate the development and implementation of specific projects in response to emerging needs. For instance, in 2001 it established the I-15 Interregional Partnership with the Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG) and other Riverside County agencies. The I-15 Partnership worked until 2010 to address congestion issues between the two counties and work-related trips on I-15 by promoting job creation in the more residential Riverside County and housing development in the San Diego job center. While this ad hoc group is no longer active, its legacy continues to inform the way in which SANDAG works with neighboring organizations, especially Tribal Nations.

When designating tasks, the agency that secures grants generally leads the work, while partnering agencies contribute staff time and data analysis support. For instance, Riverside County and SANDAG alternated leading three phases of the I-15 project. SANDAG funds dedicated staff positions to support Borders Committee activities.

SANDAG uses performance measures that encourage and track the effectiveness of cross-border collaboration. In the 2015 San Diego Forward Regional Plan, SANDAG included average travel times to and from Mexico, neighboring counties, and Tribal lands as performance measures for the region’s economic health. These efforts stemmed from 2004, when the agency began tracking similar metrics for its Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP) Performance Monitoring Report.

Imperial County is a voting member of the Borders Committee, and representatives from Orange and Riverside Counties, Mexico, and the tribes serve as advisory members. SANDAG staff coordinate regular quarterly meetings with staff from partner agencies to exchange information about key planning projects and studies as well as identify opportunities for future interregional collaboration.
Following mandates of the 1953 Ralph M. Brown Act of California, the State law that governs open meetings for local government bodies, the Borders Committee only meets in the San Diego region, but holds Ad Hoc Committee meetings—with less than a majority of the members—with its neighboring partners. Annual meetings with counterparts in Mexico are always held in San Diego.

Representatives from Mexico are official Borders Committee advisory members, which makes SANDAG the only COG in the United States with representatives from a foreign body on its governing board.

**Collaboration Accomplishments**

The [Otay Mesa–Mesa de Otay Binational Corridor Strategic Plan](#) represents one of SANDAG’s most significant binational joint planning efforts. SANDAG provided funds and the city of Tijuana in the Mexican State of Baja California contributed staff support to develop the strategic plan. One of the actions in this plan is to advance the implementation of a new border crossing at Otay Mesa East to relieve congestion and long wait times at what is currently the largest commercial California-Mexico border crossing, Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay. Additionally, SANDAG worked with Caltrans, the California Department of Transportation, to develop the [State Route 11/Otay Mesa East Port of Entry Project](#), which will provide fast and secure crossings via tolled roads serving both commercial and personal vehicles. The first segment of State Route 11 opened to traffic in March 2016.

SANDAG completed the [San Diego and Imperial Valley Comprehensive Freight Gateway Study](#) in 2010. This study forecasts regional freight traffic in San Diego and Imperial Counties through 2050, providing updated freight information to stakeholders to support a more manageable and sustainable freight network. The agency is now working to develop an update to that study, which is expected to be completed in 2016.

In 2015, SANDAG supported the [Pedestrian and Bicycle Transportation Access Study](#) of the California/Baja California Land Ports of Entry (POE) Study, an effort led by the Imperial County Transportation Commission (ICTC) in partnership with Caltrans, SANDAG, and the State of Baja California. The study compiled ideas for improvement from border travelers, community groups, and public agencies from the U.S. and Mexico. ICTC applied for and was awarded funding for the project, which was completed in February 2015.

In addition to its cross-border initiatives and planning with neighboring agencies, SANDAG has also promoted collaboration at the State level by leading efforts to establish statewide performance monitoring. The agency collaborated with other metropolitan planning organizations to review over 200 potential transportation indicators and select nine metrics that could be monitored through clear, consistent methods. Draft measures include: total and congested vehicle mile traveled (VMT) per capita, commute mode share, state of good repair, highway buffer index, fatalities and serious injuries per capita and per VMT,
transit accessibility, travel time to jobs, change in agricultural land area, and CO₂ emissions per capita.

**Challenges and Lessons Learned**

Building and maintaining relationships across agencies and borders can be challenging due to different goals and priorities, decisionmaking levels and processes, and staff turnover. While it is possible to maintain minimal levels of communication, maintaining active and productive communication is more difficult. The Borders Committee and its partner agencies have learned to address these challenges by treating each other with patience and respect, establishing timeframes that take into account anticipated staffing changes and different planning processes, and publishing regular progress reports to keep all stakeholders informed. Staff from the City of Tijuana and the State of Baja California share space in the SANDAG offices, which facilitates communication and identifying opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, SANDAG has found that having representatives from Mexico on its governing board has been mutually beneficial.

One of the most important contributors to SANDAG’s success in cross-border collaboration is that the agency funds dedicated staff positions for the effort. Regular funding and staff time allow the Borders Committee to follow through on its policy objectives to build strong relationships with partner agencies and take the lead on collaborative projects. For instance, the Borders Committee had sufficient resources to take its I-15 commuting project with Riverside County a step further by proactively researching commuting trends between San Diego and Imperial County, Orange County, and Tijuana, Mexico to identify and address any potential problems.

The Borders Committee has also found that focusing its efforts on a few areas of opportunity makes collaboration more effective and easier to communicate to the public. These areas could be geographic areas, like Otay Mesa, or issue areas, such as housing, land use, environment, and transportation. In all cases, these areas of opportunity relate to common goals among the partner agencies.

Collaboration efforts by the Borders Committee and its partner agencies have led to more effective, extensive project development and implementation than any individual agency could achieve on its own. Moreover, the dedication of these agencies’ members has enabled multi-jurisdictional planning to become the norm throughout the San Diego region.

**Additional Resources**

- 2014 San Diego Forward Regional Plan
- Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay Bilingual Corridor Strategic Plan
- I-15 Interregional Partnership
- Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP) Performance Monitoring Report
- 2015 Pedestrian and Bicycle Transportation Access Study
- 2015 Freight Study Update State Route 11/Otay Mesa East Port of Entry Project