

San Diego Association of Governments Borders Committee

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

SANDAG Crosses Borders with Countries, Counties, and Tribal Nations

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 federally-recognized tribes. This proximity to diverse neighbors with shared water and energy resources and cross-border commuting patterns requires coordination on planning projects, as reflected in Mexico's long-standing representation as an advisory member in SANDAG since 1970s. While SANDAG has long collaborated with its neighbors, it recognized the need to better address cross-border challenges. In response, SANDAG established the Borders Committee in 2001. To focus its coordination efforts, the Borders Committee created the Borders Program, which categorizes collaboration into binational, interregional, and government-to-government relations with tribal nations in San Diego County.



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

Collaboration Structure

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

In response to emerging needs, the Borders Committee also creates ad hoc committees to facilitate the development and implementation of specific projects. For instance, it established the [I-15 Interregional Partnership](#) with the Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG) and other Riverside County agencies in 2001. 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 more residential Riverside County and housing development in the San Diego job center.

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



SANDAG uses performance measures that encourage and track the effectiveness of cross-border collaboration. In the 2014 [San Diego Forward Regional Plan](#), SANDAG plans to include average travel times to/from Mexico, neighboring counties, and tribal lands as performance measures for the region's economic health. These efforts stem from 2004, when the agency began tracking similar metrics for its annual [Regional Comprehensive Plan \(RCP\) Performance Monitoring Report](#).

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 Tijuana, Baja California contributed staff support to develop this 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 on what is currently the largest commercial California-Mexico border crossing (Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay).

In addition to its cross-border 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 MPOs to review over 200 potential transportation indicators and select 9 metrics that could be monitored through clear, consistent methods. Draft measures include: total and congested 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, decision-making levels and processes, and staff turnover. 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.

One of the most important factors in SANDAG's success with cross-border collaboration is that the agency funds dedicated staff positions for these efforts. 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, however, 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 multijurisdictional planning to become the norm throughout the San Diego region.

