



A Southern California Tribal Transportation and Mobility Oral History Narrative from the Pacific Southwest Region University Transportation Center

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Project Objective

This project examines the intergovernmental relationship between San Diego County Tribal Nations and the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and its development of relationship and practices to prioritize Tribal transportation and mobility needs within the larger regional planning process. SANDAG and the Southern California Tribal Chairmen's Association (SCTCA) established a formal relationship with Tribal leadership and representation on several key regional committees that provide a platform for Tribal issues to be included in the regional planning process. While this relationship is groundbreaking, this research assesses the collaboration and examines the practices that are most effective to potentially replicate these Native-Local practices in other regions in the Southwest. SANDAG and SCTCA have a viable working relationship, however, the goal of this project is to examine how this relationship can be improved and expanded to support long-term sustainability and resiliency for Tribes in San Diego County.

Problem Statement

There are 109 federally recognized tribes in California, and many more state-recognized tribal groups seeking federal recognition. Early in the formation of the United States, the Supreme Court ruled that Tribal Nations were “sovereign, domestic dependent nations,” distinct from states and foreign governments. Thus, tribal governments exercise sovereignty over their lands and governments in similar ways as states and the federal government, including managing roads, bridges, highway access, and other mobility issues related to transportation. However, tribal access to resources supporting transportation infrastructure is vastly different from that of states and counties to perform those same tasks.

Research Methodology

The research is grounded in a place-based, oral history format that supports Indigenous traditional knowledge formation and current practices within the discipline of American Indian Studies to blend cultural studies methodologies with transportation policy analysis of the overall regional history of transportation development to examine relevant social, political, and cultural issues impacting the lives of First Peoples. Data collection included: 1) Tribal interviews and transcriptions to develop the oral history, 2) Critical review of the history of Southern California Tribal transportation and mobility, and 3) Development of a GIS Story Map of the territory described with transportation corridors, Tribal roads, and other relevant data provided in the oral histories.

Results

Findings from this project “Southern California Tribal Transportation and Mobility Oral History” suggest that the San Diego County model of tribal engagement between the Southern California Tribal Chairmen’s Association (SCTCA) and the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) can be implemented in other regions of California and throughout the nation in ways that promote meaningful transportation planning functions.

The logic of connecting SCTCA—a multi-service non-profit corporation representing a consortium of 25 federally-recognized Indian tribes in Southern California—with SANDAG, the region’s municipal planning organization (MPO), is both practical and innovative. If entities like SCTCA in other regions find ways to partner with MPOs and Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs), coalitions of tribes could find common cause to identify local transportation needs and implement related planning functions.

The oral history research also identifies that the next step for tribes in San Diego County, or any other region in the United States, is to move beyond the planning phase to implementation of meaningful transportation projects. Ultimately, transportation planning efforts can address critical tribal transportation and mobility priorities (including, current and future land use issues, pressing economic development priorities, traffic and safety challenges, and a range of other public safety, health, and social needs) but it is all for naught if those plans are never implemented.

The transportation planning collaborations between SANDAG and the 25 tribes that SCTCA represents represent a critical first step toward a range of implementations that have yet to come to fruition. Bringing transportation planning efforts to fruition for Tribes in San Diego County will require new government-to-government relationships between Caltrans and the U.S. departments of Transportation and the Interior to secure the funding and public policy support required to improve Tribal capacity to design, develop, operate, and maintain critical transportation infrastructure and systems. These new government-to-government relationships cannot be repeats of previously failed policies and engagement methods.