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Expanding equitable access to clean transportation choices critical to addressing climate crisis

Gov. Newsom Ordered Ban Sales of Gas-Powered Cars by 2035 — New Next 10 Brief Analyzes Where Clean Transportation Adoption Stands Today

San Francisco, CA — Local and state leaders must increase access to clean transportation alternatives across the state if California is to address the climate crisis and protect public health in areas with historically high air pollution levels. A new brief from Next 10, which ranks urban and rural counties and regions on clean transportation progress, finds surprising good news stories from certain rural counties despite a continual uptick in vehicle miles traveled in the state. While solutions may differ across urban, suburban, and rural counties, each must tailor a plan to best support clean transportation alternatives if California is to successfully address its largest source of climate pollution.

F. Noel Perry, the founder of the think tank Next 10 which commissioned the paper, said “In every corner of the state, the link between our transit choices, the environment and our future has never been more critical.” He added, “As fires rage throughout the west, the importance of urgently acting on climate change has become all too real. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions from our transportation sector will be a critical component to meeting our climate goals.”

The paper, entitled, [Expanding Access to Sustainable Transportation in California](#), was prepared by Beacon Economics. Beacon looked at twelve sustainable transportation indicators across four main categories—vehicle miles traveled reductions, clean vehicle adoption, and active transportation and public transit use—to compare how California counties and some of the largest regions are doing at providing equitable access to clean transportation choices, in both rural and urban counties.

Lead paper author Hoyu Chong of Beacon Economics, said, “In California, reducing emissions from the transportation sector is no easy feat—the sector is our largest contributor to statewide emissions at more than 41 percent of the total share, and on-road passenger vehicles alone represent 28 percent of the state’s

total emissions. While transit ridership is down and the economy is currently in recession, thinking about building a cleaner future for all Californians can help state leaders invest in a healthier and safer California.”

How Local Communities are Leading the Way:

- **Rural counties are leading by driving less:** Surprisingly, despite their higher daily average VMT, several rural counties have cut VMT through innovative planning and programs.
 - Statewide: Six rural counties (Calaveras, Merced, Napa, Nevada, Placer, and Plumas) saw a reduction in VMT per capita between 2013 and 2018.
 - Nevada County: Reduced VMT per capita by 6 percent—the largest decline statewide.
- **Rural counties lead on active transportation to work, too:** Four rural counties have a higher share of commuters by active transportation than San Francisco (22%): Sierra County (24.5%), Trinity County (24.2%), Modoc County (22.7%), and Mariposa County (22.2%).
 - Statewide, the ten counties with the best performance in terms of active transportation use are majority rural: Trinity, Sierra, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Alpine, and Lake.
 - Active transportation includes walking, biking, scooters, and working from home.
- **Working from home could provide opportunity for improving air quality and addressing climate:** Social isolation policies are clearly affecting traffic volumes across the state.
 - In Los Angeles County, VMT dropped 34 percent from 96 million miles in early March to 63 million miles in early April—contributing to a 31 percent decrease in PM 2.5 pollutants. Overall, Southern California experienced a 20 percent improvement in air quality during this period.
 - Some California companies, such as Twitter and Square in the Bay Area, have already announced that they will allow most employees to work from home indefinitely—even after the pandemic ends. Studies suggest that as many as 29 to 37 percent of workers nationwide could potentially work remotely full-time – if these trends continue post-COVID-19, it could have a meaningful impact on air quality improvements and GHG emissions reductions.
- **California urban counties lead on clean vehicle adoption, but some rural counties are catching up:** Rates of adoption for clean vehicles remain higher in urban areas and are generally linked to higher incomes.
 - California’s urban centers are leaders nationwide in terms of clean vehicle adoption, with the state home to top five U.S. cities in terms of electric vehicle adoption. Large urban counties tend to have higher percentages clean energy vehicle market share than rural counties in California: Santa Clara (8.8%), San Francisco (9.9%), San Diego (5.1%), Los Angeles (5.5%), and Sacramento (4.4%).
 - However, rural counties are catching up. Yolo County, with its 220,000 residents, also boasts a nearly 6 percent adoption rate on clean energy vehicles in large part due to the expansion of and continued investment in the deployment of clean vehicle charging stations.

- **Statewide, there is a short-term drop-off in public transit ridership, and a need for long-term investment:**

- Southern California - Transit ridership has been falling and Southern California has been struggling to attract and retain riders. Between 2013 and 2018, transit use fell 16.7 percent in San Bernardino (serving 1.5% of total commuters as of 2018) and 7.1 percent in Riverside (serving 1.3% of total commuters in 2018).
- Northern California - Ridership on BART had been growing prior to the pandemic but has dropped dramatically due to COVID-19.

Emphasizing the need to understand regional differences among counties, Chong added, “Clean transportation alternatives will look different depending on the area, but there are model communities across the state that are investing in clean transportation opportunities regardless of the setting. We wanted to find those successes and identify working models in counties and communities across the state.

Regional Success Snapshots: Large-scale transportation planning, management, and funding streams are typically conducted at the regional level through a transportation authority or metropolitan planning organization (MPO). Home to some of the nation’s largest MPOs, California provides a number of examples for how best to incorporate equitable access to clean transportation choices into regional planning.

- **The Bay Area ranks highest in the state in sustainable transportation performance:**

- As the fourth largest MPO in the country, the Bay Area’s Metropolitan Planning Commission (MTC) and Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) is home to the two best-performing counties statewide—San Francisco (1st) and Santa Clara (2nd).
- The balance of jobs and housing has grown increasingly divergent in the MTC region in recent years, underscoring the challenge that a lack of affordable housing has presented in terms of commute patterns. In Solano County, for example, under 60 percent of the county’s residents worked in the same county in 2018, compared to 80 percent of Napa County’s residents and 87 percent of Sonoma County’s residents. Over a quarter of Solano’s residents commute to the San Francisco metro area, while six percent commute to the Sacramento Area and Napa County.

- **Southern California’s diverse population is just as diverse in terms of sustainable transportation performance:**

- The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) serves as the largest MPO in both the state and the nation, overseeing planning for a region that accounts for approximately 25 percent of the state’s land mass and a population of more than 19 million.
- Most counties in the SCAG region achieved scores close to the statewide average of 52.2, with the exception of Ventura County (53.1), who had a lower average daily VMT per capita than all other SCAG counties.

- **The Sacramento region is home to leading rural counties:**

- SACOG performed slightly better than SCAG overall, but similar trends persist—rural counties and counties with low household income fared worse than the region’s average, and only Sacramento County (52.4) met or exceeded the statewide average score (52.2).

- Some of the region’s more rural counties ranked highest within SACOG for both alternative fuel vehicle adoption and active transportation (El Dorado, Placer, Yolo).

“The state of our housing and economy has driven people further from their homes. We need to give people clean commute options that are equitable, appropriate and affordable regardless of their zip code,” F. Noel Perry said. “If we can encourage urban development of flexible and affordable transit solutions and statewide deployment of clean vehicles, we can not only help California address the climate crisis—we can provide cleaner and healthier communities for all Californians.”

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About Next 10:

Next 10 is an independent, nonpartisan organization that educates, engages and empowers Californians to improve the state’s future. With a focus on the intersection of the economy, the environment, and quality of life, Next 10 employs research from leading experts on complex state issues and creates a portfolio of nonpartisan educational materials to foster a deeper understanding of the critical issues affecting our state.

About Beacon Economics:

Beacon Economics is one of California’s leading economic research and consulting firms. Through its Sustainable Growth and Development practice, Beacon partners with policymakers, communities, businesses, and elected officials to data-drive discourse and decision-making processes around sustainability, economic growth, and equity. Beacon leverages its quantitative and qualitative competencies as well as its policy-related expertise to help clients translate their goals into measurable metrics for success.