



## INFRASTRUCTURE

# San Diego's Transportation Leader Finds Political Limits to Thinking Big

Hasan Ikhata recently announced his resignation, ending five years of acrimony with local officials around transportation policy. Left unresolved is how the region will fund its highways and transit systems long term.

Aug. 10, 2023 • Jared Brey



Traffic leading into San Diego. The region's major source of transportation funding from gas taxes is expected to dwindle as drivers switch to electric vehicles, leaving it with hard choices on how to pay for its roads, buses and trains.

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## In Brief:

- Hasan Ikhata, the executive director of the San Diego Association of Governments, announced his resignation earlier this month.
- His tenure has been marked by political acrimony on the organization's board of directors.
- His support for a road user charge, a fee for drivers that was meant to manage congestion and raise money for other types of transportation infrastructure, caused a backlash.

The San Diego Association of Governments, the metropolitan planning organization universally referred to as SANDAG, is in charge of creating a regional plan every four years that dictates how federal and state money will flow to various transportation projects. For the last five years, SANDAG has been led by Hasan Ikhata, a transportation planner who was born in Jordan, studied in the former Soviet Union and at UCLA, and built a career in transportation with posts at the Southern California Association of Governments and Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Ikhata's tenure at the helm of SANDAG has been marked by acrimony with its board of directors, which is made up of elected officials from 19 local governments around the region. The discord began early. Ikhata was [hired](#) under the tenure of former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, after it came to light that the region wasn't bringing in enough money to complete all the transportation projects it had planned. His [approach](#) to that issue — including canceling some projects — rankled some board members. More recently, his support for a road user charge, which would charge drivers for every mile they drive in San Diego, triggered a widespread backlash in the region.

The road user charge was meant to manage congestion on area highways while simultaneously generating revenue for multimodal transportation infrastructure, including public transit. It's also a tool that many planners see as a necessary replacement for state and federal gas taxes, which dwindle as more drivers switch to electric vehicles. The road user charge was included in



SANDAG's 2021 [regional plan](#), but the board directed the organization to [remove that provision](#) immediately after adopting it last December.

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Ikhata announced earlier this month that he'll be leaving the organization at the end of the year. *The San Diego Union-Tribune* editorial board acknowledged that a per-mile fee may be "an inevitable necessity," but [wrote](#) that Ikhata was done in partly by a "disdain for politics." He spoke with *Governing* last week. The interview has been edited.

***Governing:*** I've read and listened to some other interviews you've done, and it seems like you've been suggesting for quite a while that you might not keep this job forever. What gave you the sense that this might not work out long term, and why are you resigning now?

**Hasan Ikhata:** Well, two things. I actually never intended to stay more than three years, but I stayed five. When I came to town, I was hired by the previous mayor, Kevin Faulconer, to think big and do big stuff and deliver infrastructure projects. And I did that. We completed the largest infrastructure project in San Diego's history, called the [Mid-Coast trolley extension](#), adding 11 miles of trolley to the university. We've started the design for the facility at the [border crossing](#), a \$1.5 billion project. We started the environmental design for [moving the track](#) off the bluff for the second busiest rail corridor in the country, the [LOSSAN](#). And we're starting the environmental study for connecting San Diego International Airport to rail. So I felt like I did what I came here to do, build a world-class organization, and it's time.

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I keep no secret that I have had a dysfunctional board for a long time. And we did those amazing things despite the dysfunctional board. But it's time to move on and hopefully the next CEO will continue the journey and have a better relationship with the board of directors.

***Governing:*** What is it about the board that's dysfunctional?



**Hasan Ikhata:** It's partisan. They really don't care about anything except their philosophical, political arguments. They should put the region first, but instead they are too partisan, like many places in the country. That's not very healthy. One of the reasons I thought the time is right is that we have new leadership on the board. And I think this leadership is going to try and bring the board together, and maybe with a new CEO hopefully they'll build more consensus. But I'm proud and humbled to have served the city for five years and I'm proud of the fact that we did amazing, visionary, imaginative things despite a dysfunctional board.

**Governing:** I'm going to ask you about the road user charge, but I'm hoping you can tell me a little bit about the 2021 transportation plan. What are the big things that were included in that plan and what parts are being implemented now?

**Hasan Ikhata:** It's a visionary plan. We call it the [Five Big Moves](#). The thing about the plan, it's a multimodal system. It encourages a multimodal system where people in San Diego have a choice. You can drive if you want to, and we want your drive to be faster and better, but you should be able to take transit if you want to; you can bike if you want to. Our 2021 regional plan, the five big moves, is all about a multimodal system. We are proposing 800 land miles of high-occupancy toll lanes. We're proposing to enhance the second-busiest rail corridor in the country. It does have a road user charge. The board asked us to take it out and we are in the process of taking it out.

**Governing:** Can you give me a brief rundown of what the road user charge is and how it was received by the board and by San Diego residents more generally?

**Hasan Ikhata:** Right now, nationally, we collect a gas tax. When you buy gas, part of it goes to federal and state taxes. Given that the electric fleet is getting bigger and bigger, when you buy an electric car you're not buying gas, therefore you're not paying those taxes. So the more that these electric cars and more efficient vehicles come online, the less taxes you're going to generate. So California right now has a [pilot](#) to replace the gas tax with a user tax. That's exactly what we proposed, a user fee. It was not received well by elected officials, and that's why the board directed us to take it out of the plan.

**Governing:** What does removing that component mean for the region? You wanted to use those funds partly to pay for public transit, right?

**Hasan Ikhata:** It means a lot. It means less funding for the plan. Pricing is not just about

taxing; pricing is also a way to manage congestion. But if this region is serious about funding real future transportation they have to figure out a way to pay for it. And the money has to come from somewhere. We're not the federal government: We don't print money. That's what I mean by the politics is taking over. The region needs to have a serious discussion about how to fund the plan and how to figure out a way to move the system to a multimodal approach like what we're proposing.

**Governing: What have you learned in the course of this job in terms of your ability to overcome the politics of car culture?**

**Hasan Ikhata:** I've learned a lot of things. I've been in this business for 30-some years. I've learned that in the history of the world, anything you do that means anything or is worth anything is going to be expensive, hard to do and take a long time. We have designed our lives in the U.S. around the car, and it's hard to get away from that. To build a multimodal system and to fund it is not easy. It's going to be hard, it's going to take a lot of effort, and I'm not surprised by that, because, name anything in the world that's worth anything that didn't cost a lot of money and time. This is no secret, but you have to keep trying — trying to do the right thing, trying to reimagine the future.

**Governing: I've heard people argue that San Diego is particularly not well-suited for mass transit, but I guess you don't buy that.**

**Hasan Ikhata:** Mass transit in the U.S., especially in the western U.S., is difficult, because not many people take transit. In San Diego we have 3 percent of people who take transit, and 80 percent of that 3 percent are transit-dependent. You might ask yourself why, but it's simple: Transit is not convenient, transit is not safe, transit is not frequent enough. We do transit as a second thought. You want people to take transit, do it right. Get it to where people live and work. Make it convenient, make it safe, make it frequent. And that costs money.

Now, I never said, and the plan never said, that San Diegans were going to leave their cars behind and all take transit. We were aiming at 10 percent — to go from 3 percent to 10 percent. So 90 percent would still drive. That's the reality. Contrary to the perception that "Oh my god, this is all about transit," no: It's about a multimodal system where transit becomes a real option, a viable option, for 10 percent of the population.



**Governing: Do you think some of that shift will still happen?**

**Hasan Ikhata:** I believe in the vision we designed three years ago. I believe that whoever the next CEO is will find, like I did, and like the team at SANDAG did, that it's paramount that we provide a multimodal approach. Continuing to depend totally on the car is not sustainable. If you're serious about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we have to at least give 10 percent of people the chance to ride transit. I believe the vision is going to continue despite the partisanship and the political stuff that goes on. I believe that very firmly.

**Governing:** I've heard you say that you think leaders need to be willing to take a stand and upset some people in order to get certain things done. Do you still think that after your experience at SANDAG?

**Hasan Ikhata:** More so. I always repeat the quote of Apple co-founder Steve Jobs: "If you want to make everyone happy, don't be a leader, sell ice cream." Leading is a messy business. And I feel you cannot lead unless you're willing to take a stand. And some people are going to be angry at you.

**Governing:** And you feel like that approach got things done at SANDAG?

**Hasan Ikhata:** Absolutely. Since 2021 we brought in more than \$1.5 billion from federal and state governments because they believed in what we were doing. Look at the projects we delivered and we're about to deliver. Yeah, it's working. It would have been better if we had a functional board.

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