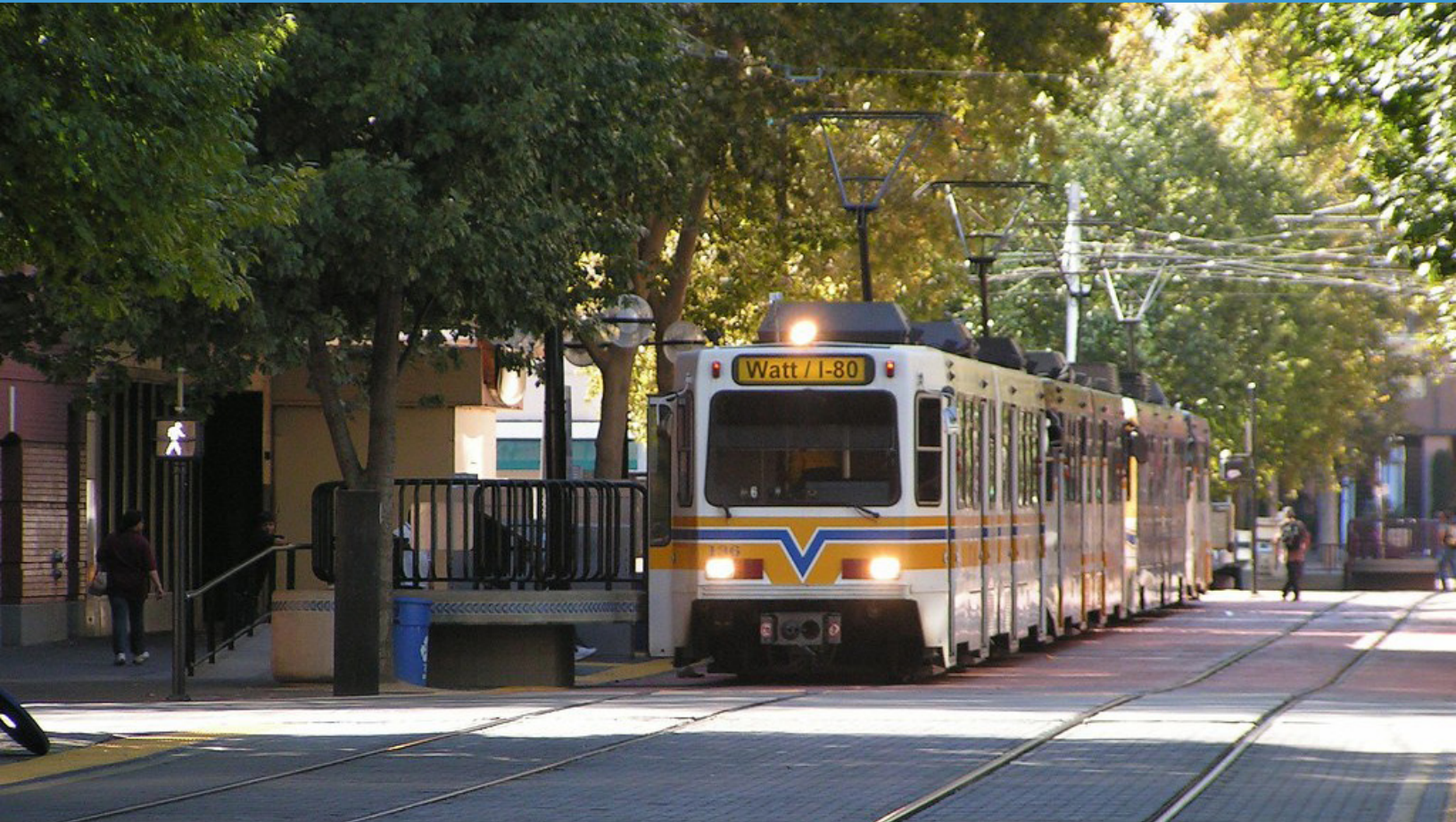


# Transit-Oriented Development and Regional Growth

Community Perspectives on the South Line Extension in Sacramento



*This case study is part of a 6-part series by UC Berkeley's Center for Community Innovation in partnership with Leadership Counsel (Fresno), Public Advocates (Bay Area), Public Counsel (LA), California Housing Partnership Corporation (Bay Area), and Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN).*

*This series features community responses to recent state-funded climate change mitigation investments around urban greening, infill affordable housing, transit, and streetscape improvements. California Strategic Growth Council provided funding support for the larger research project, **Examining the Unintended Effects of Climate Change Mitigation: A New Tool to Predict Investment-Related Displacement**, of which this series is a part.*

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## **Cover photo source:**

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/23065916@N04/2886390330>

## Introduction

Sacramento, California’s capital and one of the state’s fastest growing cities, is undergoing significant regional change.<sup>1</sup> In the historically auto-centric and sprawling Sacramento metropolitan area, recent transit investments have charted a new path that prioritizes transit-oriented development and environmental sustainability. The South Line Phase 2 Project (“the South Line project”), deemed “the highest priority transit project in the Sacramento region, is a key component of this new type of development.”<sup>2</sup> Nearly three decades in the making, the South Line project<sup>3</sup> connects Downtown Sacramento to the City of Elk Grove by way of the rapidly changing South Sacramento area.

The South Line project — which was completed in 2021 — exists in a unique context, as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to both historically low transit use and unprecedented population growth in Sacramento.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Sacramento was the most common destination for residents leaving the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, while the State of California lost 182,000 residents, the Sacramento region experienced a net increase of more than 12,000 residents.<sup>6</sup> Migration from the San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley area to the Sacramento area in 2020 increased by nearly 38 percent.<sup>7</sup>

To sustainably accommodate this new growth, the region must prioritize investments that serve both current and future residents. Successful community negotiations for the South Line project have played an important role in these ongoing efforts and have established an important precedent for equitable transit-oriented development strategies.

Drawing from seven interviewees with community leaders, government officials, and advocates, this case study uplifts local perspectives on the South line project and its impacts. Specifically, this case study investigates the community engagement processes that were implemented around the South Line to inform future coordinated anti-displacement and sustainability strategies.

## I. The South Line Phase 2

The South Line Phase 2 project (“the South Line project”) is a 4.3 mile extension of the existing light rail network’s Blue Line. The original Blue Line opened in 1987 and connected North Sacramento (near the Sacramento McClellan Airport) to South Sacramento by way of Downtown. The South Line Phase 2 project extended the line from the Meadowview neighborhood of South Sacramento to Cosumnes River College (CRC)<sup>8</sup> in the City of Sacramento,

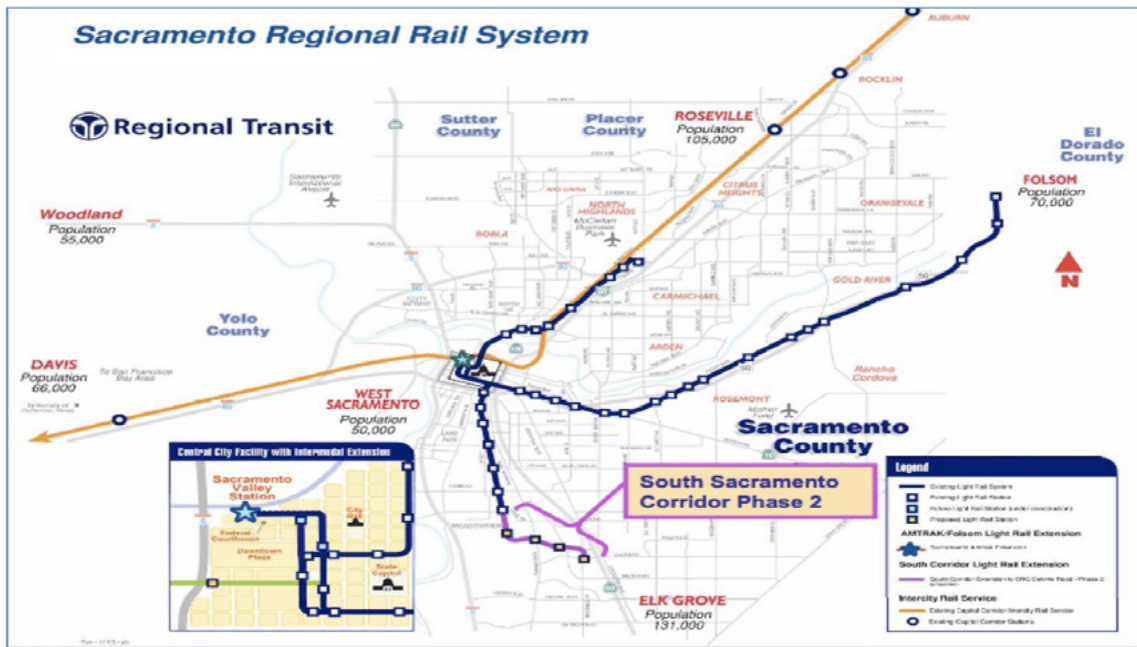


13th Street, Sacramento, CA (Credit: Peter Ehrlich)

near the neighboring City of Elk Grove (Figure 1). The project — which emerged from several decades of transit planning and a 1994 environmental review by the Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT) — aimed to improve transit connectivity throughout the Sacramento region and contribute towards the region's air quality goals by reducing traffic congestion and greenhouse emissions from automobiles.<sup>9</sup> The South Line, which came to fruition in the last five years, consisted of three phases.

Phase 1 involved a 6.3 mile extension of the light rail from 16th Street in Downtown Sacramento to Meadowview and the addition of seven new stations with bus connections. Construction on the \$222 million project began in the spring of 2000, and the South Line opened to the public in 2003 with an estimated 11,000 new commuters.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1: Project Location in the Regional Rail System. Source: SacRT.



**Figure 2:** Details of the Phase II Project and Its Corridor. Source: FTA.



Planning for Phase 2, which called for an extension of the South Line through the largely low-density, suburban neighborhoods of Meadowview, Parkway, and Valley Hi/North Laguna, began in 2002.<sup>11</sup> During this phase, four new stations — Morrison Creek, Franklin Boulevard, Center Parkway, and Cosumnes River College — were constructed (Figure 2).

The \$270 million project drew largely from the Federal Transit Administration’s New Starts Program (\$153 million), with the remaining funds from the California Traffic Congestion Relief Program (\$66 million), Sacramento County’s Measure A Sales Tax/Developer Fee (\$52.8 million), and California Department of Transportation’s Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Project (\$7.1 million).<sup>12 13</sup>

Construction on the South Line began in 2008 after design issues and funding challenges exacerbated by the Great Recession caused delays.<sup>14</sup> Several changes were made to the original project’s design, including the replacement of a surface parking lot at the CRC station with a five-story parking structure and the addition of pedestrian-friendly features at new stations.<sup>15 16</sup>

The line opened to the public in August 2015, with three stations in operation (Franklin, Center Parkway, and CRC).<sup>17</sup> The Morrison Creek infill station, which was added later in the design process, opened in August 2021.<sup>18</sup> The final stage of the South Line project, Phase 3, plans for an extension of the South Line from CRC through the City of Elk Grove. As of 2021, this phase has been put on hold due to funding constraints. In the meantime, the City of Elk Grove’s transit

services have merged with SacRT to better connect bus routes across the South Sacramento region.<sup>19</sup>

According to 2016 data, ridership on the South Line following implementation of Phase 2 averaged 4,300 trips on weekdays.<sup>20</sup> This represented an increase of 1,900 trips compared to ridership numbers prior to the completion of Phase 2.<sup>21</sup> Ninety percent of these trips were taken by commuters who were either government workers or students at CRC.<sup>22 23 24</sup> Sacramento residents overall, however, still rely primarily on buses or personal automobiles for travel. According to Allison Joe, Chief of Staff at Sacramento City Council, “[the South Line] is primarily used as a commuter line to get to and from school [and work], not as much of a hop on hop off running errands kind of transit system.”<sup>25</sup>

## II. The South Line Extension and Growth of the Sacramento Region

The South Line project is part of a larger transit-oriented development strategy that aims to sustainably accommodate Sacramento’s rapidly increasing population while addressing rising costs and displacement pressures.

In recent decades, the Sacramento region has felt the ripple effects of the San Francisco Bay Area’s explosive economic growth.<sup>26</sup> Based on the Urban Displacement Project’s analysis of household migration data from Data Axle (formerly Infogroup), over two-thirds of households (approximately 26,000) that moved to the Sacramento region from 2007 to 2019 came from the Bay Area.<sup>27</sup> The City of Sacramento’s population increased by 12.63%, from 466,488 to 525,398, between 2010 and 2021.<sup>28</sup> Among the fastest growing cities in the Northern California megaregion<sup>29</sup> are Elk Grove (with an annual growth rate of 5.19%) and West Sacramento (3.28%).<sup>30</sup> Sacramento also experienced once of the highest increases in tech workers moving into the region between 2019 and 2020.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the San Francisco region experienced the steepest declines in immigration of tech workers.<sup>32</sup>

While rents in the San Francisco Bay Area dropped during the pandemic for the first time in years, rents in Sacramento increased.

According to Realtor.com data, from mid-2019 to mid-2020, the median rent for a studio decreased 31% in San Francisco but increased 16% in Sacramento.<sup>33</sup> South Sacramento has almost twice the share of low-income households (58% vs. 34%) and a higher proportion of cost-burdened households (43% vs. 35%) compared to Sacramento County overall. The area also has a higher proportion of minorities; only 35% of South Sacramento residents are white, compared with 52% in the county.<sup>34</sup>



Consumnes River College (Credit: Peter Ehrlich)

In an attempt to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the new South Line stations while ensuring the benefits of the project are shared equitably, SacRT and the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) invited the Sacramento chapter of the Urban Land Institute's (ULI) Advisory Services Panel to develop an equitable transit-oriented development (TOD) plan for the Florin and Meadowview stations in South Sacramento. The plan prioritizes the construction of dense, mixed-income housing development and community facilities around the stations.<sup>35</sup> SacRT and SACOG also developed a TOD Action Plan and Toolkit in 2020 to coordinate TOD efforts across the different jurisdictions in the Sacramento region and promote housing and mixed-use development around South Line stations.<sup>36</sup>

### III. Partnerships and a Community-Engaged Planning Process

A series of community negotiations over the course of several years led to changes to the original South Line Phase 2 plan. Overall, residents, community advocates, and city officials lauded the community engagement processes and were pleased that the resulting design modifications addressed urgent resident concerns. SacRT and CRC were among the key players in the community engagement process.

According to Jo Noble, Senior Community and Government Affairs Officer at SacRT, the agency took concrete steps to incentivize community participation. For example, SacRT hosted meetings at conveniently located local schools and also provided Hmong and Spanish interpreters to engage the region's sizable immigrant community. According to Noble, the community meetings had "fairly good attendance" of about 25 - 50 people, and attracted primarily middle-aged and older residents as well as CRC affiliates. She recounted<sup>37</sup>:

*"We basically were hands on...I was out in the neighborhoods, door to door talking to people about the alignment, dropping door hangers with phases of construction [that would say] 'hey, look for this, or there's going to be trucks in your neighborhood, or there's going to be construction crews walking up and down the alignment... So there was a lot of...hand-holding and making sure that the community knew we were listening to them and their concerns."*

One of the main issues that stakeholders had with the South Line pertained to the segment south of the Meadowview station. In the original design, SacRT's light rail tracks were to be located 25 feet from the existing Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) tracks. This required the relocation of a large underground gas line to a proposed location under the residential street to the west. Although a risk assessment found the below-street location was safe, residents objected.<sup>38</sup>

In 2009, in response to a freight train derailment at Denver Union Station, UPRR called for 50-foot track separations or crash walls between its tracks and transit tracks. For the South Line, SacRT opted for the 50-foot separation that in turn required additional land, including a 4700' x 40' swath from UPRR, a 20' strip from over thirty residential parcels, and three full parcels with residential relocation. The increased land acquisition meant the gas line did not have to be relocated after all; however, a major electric line did need to be relocated to prevent electric

utility workers from accessing the lines via residential parcels. Along the same segment of the line, south of Meadowview, SacRT built retaining walls to minimize train noise. SacRT also compensated affected homeowners who complied with the change in plans from the onset.<sup>39</sup>

In parallel to these community negotiations, SacRT worked with CRC to determine an appropriate parking strategy for the CRC station, which was planned to be sited partially on campus property. Following recommendations from the FTA as noted earlier, SacRT and CRC decided to construct a park-and-ride structure directly south of the main college entrance instead of a surface parking lot to promote transit-oriented development in the college district.<sup>40</sup> Despite opposition from the Sacramento Transit Riders Union (SacTRU), which argued that the site was originally designated for non-automotive uses, plans for the structure were ultimately approved by the city's Planning Commission.<sup>41</sup>

As a part of CRC and SacRT's partnership, CRC granted an easement for the parking structure and agreed to cover its ongoing operation and maintenance costs while SacRT covered construction costs. CRC also agreed to dedicate its own police department to monitoring the safety of the station and the parking structure. Unlike the other SacRT park-and-ride stations, the CRC station charges a parking fee (currently \$2 per day) similar to other parking on the CRC campus, as funds are used for CRC's continued maintenance of the station.

While the community engagement process for the South Line was largely considered successful by interviewees, some noted that historically disadvantaged groups were not represented in meetings due to scheduling and other concerns.<sup>42</sup> As a result, subsequent planning efforts aimed to more comprehensively reach residents who would be most impacted by future plans. For example, as part of the community outreach process for the Florin and Meadowview South Sacramento equitable TOD plans, the facilitator (ULI) prioritized building relationships with residents and addressing their deeply rooted mistrust of institutions<sup>43</sup>:

*"I think that was where a lot of our success was. Being able to come in with honesty of saying to community members, 'Hey, you've worked with [organizations] in the past, and we can understand there may have been unintended consequences of prior research, but we're here now and we want to listen....' Being quiet and just having a listening session first, right? To establish and gain that trust."*

Jose Bodipo-Memba of the ULI noted that their approach was more hands-on and less governmental, which he explained contributed to their success. As displacement pressures heighten along with Sacramento's rapid growth, deep and effective community engagement will be increasingly critical.<sup>44</sup>

## IV. Displacement, Sustainability, and Development Concerns

Interviewees were cautiously optimistic when reflecting on the South Line's future in Sacramento. Some expressed enthusiasm for the project and the new paradigm of equitable TOD in the region that is shaping future investment. For interviewee Kacey Lizon of SACOG, TOD is an important part of building a "culture of transit" in an auto-centric area, and is more

effective than focusing solely on transit ridership.<sup>45</sup> Others felt, however, that new transit opportunities like the South Line extension have not necessarily changed residents' travel preferences and behaviors. Sal Sanneh of Health Education Council noted that light rail is still not residents' first choice of transportation, given that it often takes longer and is less convenient than driving:

*"If you have a car, then that commute [to work] would be 30 minutes, maybe no more than an hour. If you're taking the regional transit, and the light rail, that can be then turned into two and a half, maybe three hours."*<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, interviewees noted that while some areas along the line remain undeveloped, there are untapped opportunities for equitable TOD. As noted by Kacey Lizon of SACOG<sup>47</sup>:

*"We have this opportunity, because the light rail station is there, but there's not a lot of [new] development that has happened. [The question is], 'Can we plan for some investment around the station areas that is equitable?'"*

As noted by Jose Bodipo-Memba of ULI-Sacramento, new development has largely been concentrated around CRC, but other areas along the line are "still ripe for opportunity".<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Joana Mack of ULI-Sacramento noted the importance of prioritizing affordable housing development around stations to support truly equitable TOD that addresses continued displacement pressures.<sup>49</sup>



Sacramento River (Credit: Michael J. Nevins)

Furthermore, interviewees noted that some Sacramento residents have been resistant to light rail projects in their neighborhoods. For example, while many have expressed a desire for direct transit service to Downtown and the International Airport, a proposed extension (known as the "Green Line extension") between these two destinations has faced opposition from residents who live near the planned route.<sup>50</sup> SacRT responded to these conflicting demands in 2018 by introducing Smart Ride, an on-demand shuttle service that is now the largest microtransit system in the nation.<sup>51</sup> Similar to UberPool and Lyft Line, Smart Ride involves use of an app to hail shared rides, but with consistent low or no-cost fares.<sup>52</sup>

As noted by Jo Noble of SacRT, SmartRide is a national model in "getting transit where it needs to be" while addressing climate change by reducing reliance on automobiles. She further notes<sup>53</sup>:

*“[Smart Ride] is the type of transit that’s going to serve the community best in the future as far as sustainability and [addressing] climate change. And people have access to transit, because frankly, you can’t put big buses everywhere. It’s economically not feasible. Sometimes the people that need buses the most [might just have] four people on the bus. Whereas if you run on a really popular route, the bus is full [with] middle income [and] upper income commuters.”*

Though Smart Ride currently does not service all of South Sacramento, Joanna Mack of ULI-Sacramento noted its potential for expanding access to transportation to the region’s most economically disadvantaged residents.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, interviewees expressed enthusiasm for recent city investments in electric bicycles and scooters, which they noted will complement the Sacramento region’s expanding multi-modal transit system. As noted by Jose Bodipo-Memba of ULI-Sacramento, there is also an opportunity to better align such investments in transit and microtransit with local job creation<sup>55</sup>:

*“Projects like the [South Line have the opportunity to] align the jobs involved with construction, design, development, and get those jobs in the hands of folks who live in that neighborhood, so they can be a part of literally designing the communities that [they live in].”*

## V. Looking Forward

While the South Line project has set the stage for a new chapter of community-engaged equitable TOD projects in Sacramento, interviewees emphasized the continued need to address displacement pressures head on as the region grows.

As noted by one interviewee who works at an advocacy organization, even before COVID-19, Sacramento residents were being priced out of the city and were moving to more affordable areas like Reno, Nevada. Rising housing prices have also led residents to “double up and triple up” in existing housing units and live in their cars. Furthermore, the recent announcement of a proposed \$3.75 billion UC Davis Medical Center expansion just southeast of Downtown Sacramento has further raised concerns about the region’s ongoing displacement pressures.<sup>56</sup> The expansion, called Aggie Square, will economically benefit the Sacramento region, but it is likely to increase housing prices and rents in nearby neighborhoods.<sup>57</sup>

Sacramento city officials, community leaders, advocates, and residents have joined forces to put anti-displacement on a citywide agenda in response to these trends. For example, the City of Sacramento passed an inclusionary housing ordinance in 2015 to incentivize the production of more affordable housing and combat gentrification. In 2020, multiple organizations and individuals established Sacramento Investment Without Displacement, a coalition that worked with the UC Regents to develop a community benefits agreement that prioritizes preservation of affordable housing as part of the UC Davis Medical Center expansion.<sup>58</sup> Finally, in January 2021 — nine months before single-family zoning was eliminated in the state of California<sup>59</sup> — Sacramento became one of the first cities in the nation to eliminate single-family zoning. This landmark policy change is expected to encourage a diversity of housing options in the region

and help retain long-time residents.<sup>60</sup>

As the Sacramento region continues to cope with the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewees agreed that it will be more important than ever to coordinate anti-displacement strategies and capitalize on the equitable TOD opportunities associated with future transit investments.

## Endnotes

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