California Department of Housing and Community Development

SB 79 Advisory Clarifications on Definitions for Metropolitan Planning Organizations

On the Implementation of Senate Bill 79 (Chapter 512, Statutes of 2025)

Housing Policy Development Division
March 20, 2026

Introduction

The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG), San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), and Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) requested early consultation with the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) on the implementation of SB 79, including clarification of certain definitions to facilitate the metropolitan planning organizations' (MPO) ability to complete their statutory mapping role in a consistent manner across the state. In response, HCD facilitated several meetings with MPOs, in consultation with Caltrans, with the goal of arriving on definitions of key terms in the statute.

MPOs also requested that HCD issue a memo in advance of the statute's July 1, 2026 operative date to assist MPOs with consistent implementation of SB 79 mapping across the regions. This memo is advisory and consolidates definitions discussed with MPOs, in consultation with Caltrans, which HCD has compiled at the MPOs' request to support carrying out their duties under Government Code section 65912.160, subdivision (f).

Executive Summary of SB 79

SB 79 makes qualified transit-oriented housing developments an allowed use on sites zoned for residential, mixed-use, or commercial development that are located near specified transit stops in urban transit counties with more than 15 passenger rail stations. Governor Newsom signed SB 79 into law on October 10, 2025, and the law is codified in Government Code Chapter 4.1.5 (Transit-Oriented Development), which includes sections 65912.155 through 65912.162.

HCD is tasked with overseeing compliance with SB 79,[1] including reviewing enacted SB 79 ordinances[2] and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Alternative Plans[3] and determining their compliance with state law. HCD is also required to promulgate standards for inclusion of SB 79 sites in the housing element sites inventory.[4] In addition, SB 79 requires that each MPO must create a map of TOD stops and zones within its region by tier, and the maps carry a rebuttable presumption of validity for use by project applicants and local governments.[5]

[1] Gov. Code, § 65912.160, subd. (a).
[2] Gov. Code, § 65912.160, subd. (d).
[3] Gov. Code, § 65912.161, subd. (d).
[4] Gov. Code, § 65912.160, subd. (b).
[5] Gov. Code, § 65912.160, subd. (f).

Clarifications on Definitions

Based on discussions with ABAG/MTC, SACOG, SANDAG, and SCAG, and in consultation with Caltrans, the following key definitions are intended to facilitate consistent implementation of SB 79. The left-hand column is the definition or reference in the statute, while the right-hand column provides advisory clarifications informed by input from MPOs and Caltrans.

Adjacent

"Adjacent" means within 200 feet of any pedestrian access point to a transit-oriented development stop. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (a)*	The edge of the parcel(s) associated with the proposed housing development project is within 200 feet of any pedestrian access point to a TOD stop.

Bus Service

…[B]us service meeting the standards of paragraph (1) of subdivision (a) of Section 21060.2 of the Public Resources Code. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (o)* *Full-time dedicated bus lanes or operation in a separate right-of-way dedicated for public transportation with a frequency of service interval of 15 minutes or less during the morning and afternoon peak commute periods.* *Public Resources Code, § 21060.2, subd. (a)(1)*	A public mass transit service that includes full-time dedicated bus lanes or operation in a separate right-of-way dedicated for public transportation with a frequency of service interval of 15 minutes or less during the morning and afternoon peak commute periods. A qualifying bus service TOD stop is a location where the bus stop is adjacent to a full-time dedicated transit lane and the average bus service intervals across the combined morning and afternoon peak periods is 15 minutes or less.

Commuter Rail

"Commuter rail" means a public rail transit service not meeting the standards for heavy rail or light rail, excluding California High-Speed Rail and Amtrak Long Distance Service. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (b)*	A public rail transit service that is not any of the following: heavy or light rail, California High-Speed Rail, Amtrak Long Distance Service, or privately operated passenger rail service. A commuter rail can include planned high or very high frequency commuter rail public rail transit service, including those managed by state-supported Joint Powers Authorities (e.g., Gold Runner, Capitol Corridor, Pacific Surfliner).

Commuter Rail, High-Frequency

"High-frequency commuter rail" means a commuter rail service operating a total of at least 48 trains per day across both directions, not including temporary service changes of less than one month or unplanned disruptions, and not meeting the standard for very high frequency commuter rail, at any point in the past three years.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (e)

A commuter rail service operating an average of at least 48 trains per weekday across all directions at any point in the past three years, not including temporary service changes of less than one month or unplanned disruptions, and not meeting the standard for very high frequency commuter rail. The average is the sum of the number of scheduled stops at a station for a commuter rail service for all weekdays, divided by five weekdays.

In assessing whether a station meets this threshold, frequency is based on the total number of trains serving the station, including trains operated by multiple commuter rail services where applicable. This approach reflects the overall level of transit access and frequency experienced by riders at a given stop.

Commuter Rail, Very High Frequency

"Very high frequency commuter rail" means a commuter rail service with a total of at least 72 trains per day across both directions, not including temporary service changes of less than one month or unplanned disruptions, at any point in the past three years.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (r)

A commuter rail service operating an average of at least 72 trains per weekday across all directions at any point in the past three years, not including temporary service changes of less than one month or unplanned disruptions. The average is the sum of the number of scheduled stops at a station for a commuter rail service for all weekdays, divided by five weekdays.

In assessing whether a station meets this threshold, frequency is based on the total number of trains serving the station, including trains operated by multiple commuter rail services where applicable. This approach reflects the overall level of transit access and frequency experienced by riders at a given stop.

Heavy Rail Transit

"Heavy rail transit" means a public electric railway line with the capacity for a heavy volume of traffic using high-speed and rapid acceleration passenger rail cars operating singly or in multicar trains on fixed rails, separate rights-of-way from which all other vehicular and foot traffic are excluded, and high platform loading. "Heavy rail transit" does not include California High-Speed Rail.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (d)

A public electric railway line that includes all the following:

- Has capacity for a heavy volume of traffic,
- Uses high-speed and rapid acceleration passenger rail cars,
- Operates singly or in multicar trains on fixed rails,
- Operates in a separate right-of-way from which all other vehicular and foot traffic are excluded, and
- Stops at stations with high platform loading (i.e., where the platforms are built at the same height as the train floor).

Heavy rail transit lines typically use a third rail power source. Heavy rail transit does not include California High-Speed Rail.

Light Rail Transit

"Light rail transit" includes streetcar, trolley, and tramway service. "Light rail transit" does not include airport people movers.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (h)

An electric railway line that is not a "heavy rail transit" line which typically draws power from overhead wires. Includes, but is not limited to, streetcar, trolley, and tramway service. Does not include airport people movers or cable cars.

Passenger Rail Station

[Undefined]

"Urban transit county" means a county with more than 15 passenger rail stations.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (q)

A passenger rail station includes all forms of public heavy rail, light rail, or commuter rail stations that are in active operation and provide regular service. A passenger rail station does not include planned rail stations that are not yet in service. A passenger rail station occupying one physical location counts as a single station, even if multiple rail services utilize the station.

Pedestrian Access Point

[Undefined]

"Adjacent" means within 200 feet of any pedestrian access point to a transit-oriented development stop.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (a)

For purposes of this chapter, the distance of a transit-oriented housing development project from a transit-oriented development stop shall be measured in a straight line from the nearest edge of the parcel containing the proposed project to a pedestrian access point for the transit-oriented development stop.

Gov. Code, § 65912.157, subd. (b)

A pedestrian access point is any applicable station entrance, boarding platform access point, or location of a transit stop as defined and depicted on the applicable MPO SB 79 map. MPOs may rely on General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) data, if provided by individual transit providers within each region, and may add additional pedestrian access points for TOD stops with multiple entrances.

Project Site

[Undefined]

A housing development project shall be an allowed use as a transit-oriented housing development on any site zoned for residential, mixed, or commercial development within one-half or one-quarter mile of a transit-oriented development stop, if the development complies with the applicable of all of the following requirements:

Gov. Code, § 65912.157, subd. (a)

For purposes of this chapter, the distance of a transit-oriented housing development project from a transit-oriented development stop shall be measured in a straight line from the nearest edge of the parcel containing the proposed project to a pedestrian access point for the transit-oriented development stop.

Gov. Code, § 65912.157, subd. (b)

Parcel(s) containing the proposed housing development project.

Rail Transit

"Rail transit" has the same meaning as defined in Section 99602 of the Public Utilities Code. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (k)*	[No clarification] Same meaning as defined in Section 99602 of the Public Utilities Code, which is a rail mass transportation operation usually within an urban area, generally characterized by more frequent service over shorter distances than normally provided by commuter rail service or intercity rail service, and operating on a rail line without any or with very limited rail freight service.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Stop

"Transit-oriented development stop" means a major transit stop, as defined by Section 21064.3 of the Public Resources Code, and also including stops on a route for which a preferred alternative has been selected or which are identified in a regional transportation improvement program, that is served by heavy rail transit, very high frequency commuter rail, high frequency commuter rail, light rail transit, or bus service within an urban transit county meeting the standards of paragraph (1) of subdivision (a) of Section 21060.2 of the Public Resources Code. When a new transit route or extension is planned that was not identified in the applicable regional transportation plan on or before January 1, 2026, those stops shall not be eligible as transit-oriented development stops unless they would be eligible as Tier 1 transit-oriented development stops. If a county becomes an urban transit county subsequent to July 1, 2026, then bus service in that county shall remain ineligible for designation of a transit-oriented development stop. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (p)*	A TOD stop is any of the following: ▪ An existing or planned transit station or stop identified in a region's federally or state-mandated transportation improvement program (TIP) that is served by any of the following: light rail or heavy rail, high-frequency or very high-frequency commuter rail, or eligible bus service (see also "Bus Service"). Planned TOD stops in a region's TIP may be limited to include only those with any amount of committed construction funding. ▪ Selected preferred alternative route stops from an adopted CEQA/NEPA document, an adopted locally preferred alternative (LPA), or other local implementing document as determined by the MPO, regardless of their status in a federally or state mandated TIP.

TOD Stop, Tier 1

"Tier 1 transit-oriented development stop" means a transit-oriented development stop within an urban transit county served by heavy rail transit or very high frequency commuter rail.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (n)

An existing or planned TOD stop within an urban transit county that is served by heavy rail transit or very high-frequency commuter rail.

TOD Stop, Tier 2

"Tier 2 transit-oriented development stop" means a transit-oriented development stop within an urban transit county, excluding a Tier 1 transit-oriented development stop, served by light rail transit, by high-frequency commuter rail, or by bus service meeting the standards of paragraph (1) of subdivision (a) of Section 21060.2 of the Public Resources Code.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (o); Public Resources Code, § 21060.2, subd. (a)(1)

An existing or planned TOD stop within an urban transit county (excluding a Tier 1 TOD Stop) that is served by light rail transit, high-frequency commuter rail, or qualifying bus service. See also "Bus Service."

TOD Zone

"Transit-oriented development zone" means the area within one-half mile of a transit-oriented development stop.

Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (m)

[No clarification]

The area within one-half mile of a TOD stop.

Unincorporated Area of a County

[Undefined]

This section shall not apply to a local agency until July 1, 2026, unless the local agency adopts an ordinance or local transit-oriented development alternative plan deemed compliant by the department before July 1, 2026. It shall not apply within an unincorporated area of a county until the 7th regional housing needs allocation cycle.

Gov. Code, § 65912.157, subd. (n)

An area that does not have its own local government and is governed as part of a larger administrative division, such as a county.

SB 79 does not apply to an unincorporated area of a county until the date that its 7th cycle housing element is due (i.e., at the beginning of the eight-year planning period), although the portion within the TOD Zone of a qualifying jurisdiction is eligible for provisions under SB 79,

	even where the TOD Stop is located in an unincorporated jurisdiction.

Urban Transit County

"Urban transit county" means a county with more than 15 passenger rail stations. *Gov. Code, § 65912.156, subd. (q)*	[No clarification] A county with more than 15 passenger rail stations.

Existing Rail Typologies

Based on the advisory clarifications of statutory definitions, and in response to MPO requests, the following classifications for existing rail typologies for the purpose of SB 79 implementation are provided in the table below. This table does not reflect rail typologies for rail services that have yet to be constructed or enter into operation. Note: Not all commuter rail stops and stations are necessarily TOD stops; to be a TOD stop, it must meet the definitions in the statute as clarified above.

Heavy Rail	Light Rail	Commuter Rail
▪ Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART): All except eBART Pittsburg Center, Antioch stations ▪ Los Angeles (LA) Metro Rail: B, D Lines	▪ LA Metro Rail (A, C, E, K Lines) ▪ Sacramento Regional Transit (SacRT) ▪ San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) Trolley ▪ San Francisco Municipal Railway (Muni) Metro and Streetcar ▪ Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Light Rail	▪ Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) ▪ Arrow ▪ BART (eBART Pittsburg Center, Antioch stations only) ▪ Caltrain ▪ Capitol Corridor ▪ Coaster ▪ Metrolink ▪ Pacific Surfliner ▪ San Joaquins (Gold Runner) ▪ Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) ▪ Sprinter

Pursuant to these classifications, SB 79's upzoning provisions (Gov. Code, § 65912.157) will take effect on July 1, 2026, in Alameda, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and San Diego Counties. Under the statute, applicability is tied to the presence of qualifying transit infrastructure within a county. Accordingly, the geographic scope of SB 79 is dynamic and will modify over time, including when additional qualifying rail or transit projects are completed and placed into service.