Despite law, some areas not meeting clean air goals

California has some of the most ambitious clean air goals in the country, but a report the state’s Air Resources Board released Monday shows communities are not on track to meet them.

California law requires regions to develop plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through land use and transportation policies. But communities aren’t actually implementing those plans, according to the report.

“Initial indications suggest that while California has put in place appropriate long-range greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, as well as the regional growth and investment plans that would allow it to slow growth in vehicle travel, the real-world results are falling significantly short of the SB 375 targets and are moving in the wrong direction,” the report says.

Under Gov. Jerry Brown’s leadership, California has become a global leader on climate change policies. Brown oversaw an extension of the state’s cap-and-trade program that charges polluters for emissions and approved other laws to boost clean energy use.

The state recently announced it met its goal to reduce emissions to 1990 levels four years early. The regional targets are separate from that goal. But communities will need to significantly reduce transportation emissions to reach the state’s next goal of lowering emissions another 40 percent by 2030, according to the report.

The report released Monday highlights the challenges California faces meeting its future goals, as emissions from transportation increase.
“It’s a wake-up call,” said Ella Wise of ClimatePlan California, a nonprofit group that advocates for sustainable land use and transportation policies.

She attributes the results to local governments failing to invest in public transportation, build affordable housing near transit and make it easier for people to walk or bike to work instead of driving.

The state’s housing shortage forces many residents to live far from where they work, increasing the time Californians spend driving. Emissions from transportation are the largest source of greenhouse gasses.

The Air Resources Board sets air pollution standards, monitors air quality and develops plans to meet the emissions reduction goals set by the Legislature. It also sets emissions reductions goals for California regions.

Next week, the Air Resources Board and the California Transportation are scheduled to meet and discuss the findings in the report, which calls for different parts of government to work together to reduce emissions.

The report is the first by the Air Resources Board to assess regions’ progress on their climate goals. A law approved by the Legislature and the governor last year calls for reports every four years to assess the effect of the 2008 law that required regions to develop emissions reduction plans. When that 2008 measure was moving through the state Legislature, one committee analysis on the bill warned it lacked enforcement provisions to ensure communities actually implemented the plans.

The Monday report comes on the heels of a federal assessment released last week that found climate change seriously threatens the U.S. economy and is exacerbating natural disasters like wildfires.