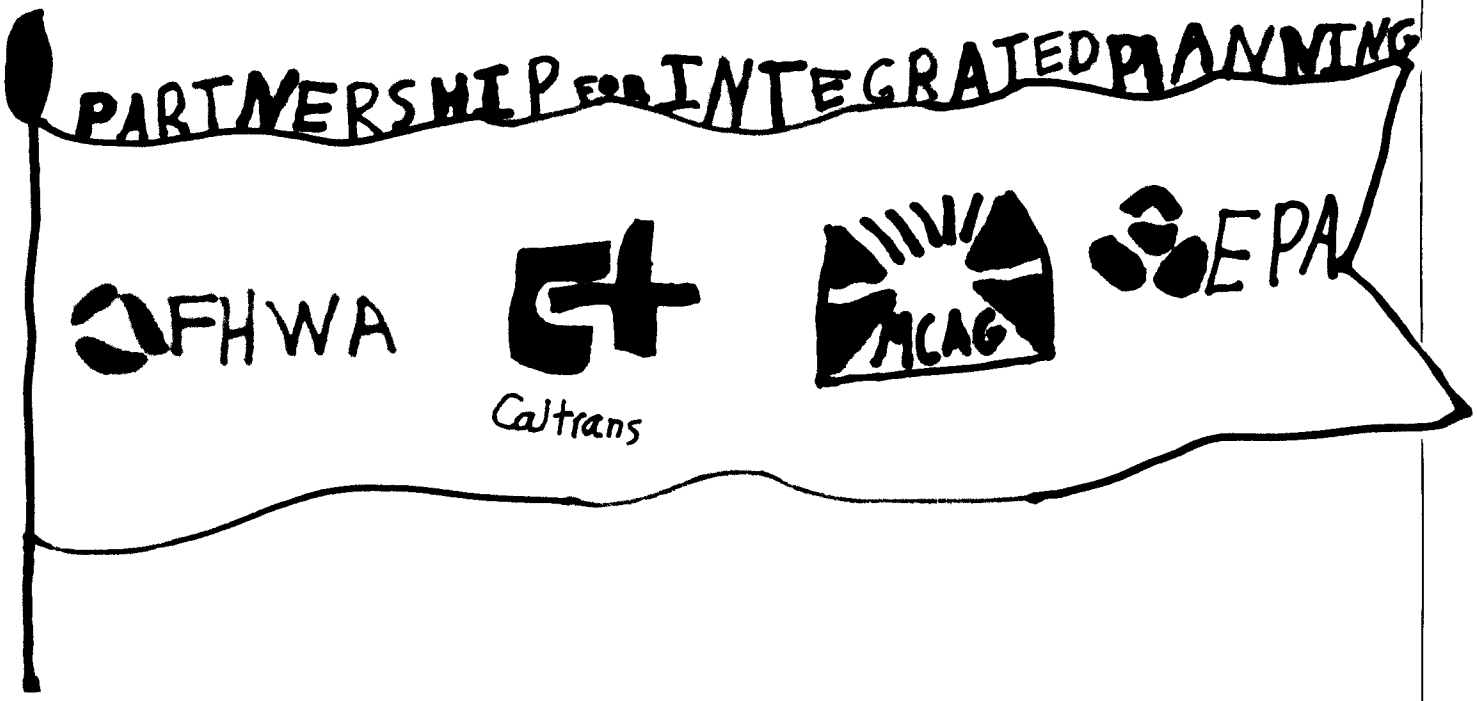

Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP)
Merced County Association of Governments
Pilot Project

Final Report - Summer 2005

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"If Merced County were a person..."

For comments or questions on the Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP) project, please contact:

Merced County Association of Governments
Attn: Marjie Kirn, Deputy Executive Director
369 West 18th Street
Merced, California 95340
Telephone: (209) 723-3153
Website: www.mcag.cog.ca.us

Report prepared by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). For comments or questions on the report, please contact:

California Department of Transportation
Attn: Sharon Scherzinger, Office Chief
Division of Transportation Planning
1120 N Street, Room 5300
Mail Stop 32
Sacramento, California 95814
Telephone: (916) 653-3362
Website: http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/orip/Collaborative_Planning.htm

The California Department of Transportation would like to gratefully acknowledge the hard work and dedication that MCAG staff gave to the project throughout the four years. The project would have not been successful without the leadership and support provided by: Jesse Brown - Executive Director, Marjie Kirn - Deputy Executive Director, Candice Steelman – Public Programs Specialist, Richard Green – Geographic Information Systems Program Manager and Matt Fell – Regional Planner. Thank you for allowing us to be a part of the pilot project and for paving the way for future projects based on your successful effort.

Steering Committee and Contributors

Steering Committee

Jesse Brown
Executive Director
MCAG

Marjie Kirn
Deputy Executive Director
MCAG

Candice Steelman
Public Programs Specialist
MCAG

Suzanne Marr
Environmental Protection Specialist
United States Environmental Protection Agency

Sue Kiser
Chief of Planning & Environment
Federal Highway Administration

Sharon Scherzinger
Supervising Senior Transportation Planner
California Department of Transportation

Jay Norvell
Division of Environmental Analysis Chief
California Department of Transportation

Katie Benouar
Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Dara Wheeler
Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Marilee Mortenson
Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Ken Baxter
District Deputy Director for Planning
California Department of Transportation

Maria Rodriguez
Associate Transportation Planner
California Department of Transportation

Stephanie Peck
Environmental Policy Analyst
University of California Davis

Mike McCoy
Academic Administrator
University of California Davis

Contributors

Bill Haas
Transportation Planner
Federal Highway Administration

Karina O'Connor
Environmental Protection Specialist
United States Environmental Protection Agency

Cindy Adams
Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Dana Cowell
Deputy District Director for Planning
California Department of Transportation

Christine Cox-Kovachevich
Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Steve Croteau
Associate Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation

Brian Smith
Deputy Director of Planning & Modal Programs
California Department of Transportation

We also would like to thank the following for their continued support:

MCAG Governing Board
Rich Green, MCAG
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The Nature Conservancy, CA Chapter

Executive Summary

Merced County is located at the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley in Central California. Merced County encompasses 1,971 square miles of land. The county is bounded by Stanislaus County to the north, Mariposa County to the east, Madera and Fresno counties to the south, and Santa Clara and San Benito counties to the west. The population was 225,115 in 2003. The county is expected to be one of the fastest-growing in the state over the next 30 to 50 years with its population doubling by 2030.

The Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP) project was the result of a 1999 partnership agreement (known as the Mare Island Accord) between the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). The agreement set out to provide a framework to improve interagency communications, the quality and timeliness of planning data and to address environmental issues early in the transportation planning process to avoid major delays during project delivery. The pilot project especially desired to work with a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

MCAG was selected by the USEPA, FHWA and Caltrans because of their commitment to leadership in the Central Valley, their involvement in multi-agency planning efforts and their advanced Geographic Information Systems (GIS) capabilities. They were also experiencing rapid development and needed to look beyond traditional single-focus planning. Most importantly, they were willing, interested and committed to championing the project.

The PIP focused on enhancing the planning processes of MCAG's 20-year Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). A major new feature was the use of a scenario-based GIS modeling tool developed by the University of California Davis – Information Center for the Environment (ICE). This tool, UPlan, enabled modeling and displayed the results of several regional scenarios for the PIP participants (elected officials, resource agency staff and the public), evaluated the scenarios and developed a plan-level strategy for long-term transportation infrastructure. Scenario-based planning is advantageous because it enables planners to illustrate the effects of land use and transportation policies with "pretty" maps displaying where growth may be most likely to occur or where it may be expensive or conflict with community values.

The intent was that the planning lessons learned in identifying environmental issues prior to project development could be used as a model throughout California. The PIP has been showcased nationwide and is gaining attention as one of the first examples of environmental considerations incorporated in the regional transportation planning process.

One of the innovative and outstanding areas where MCAG was successful was in their increased public participation. MCAG experienced an 800% increase in public participation in the transportation planning process. Staff held over 20 public meetings each quarter that yielded an unprecedented 110 public meetings over 18 months.

The PIP set out to accomplish the following goals:

- Create a model for an improved regional transportation planning process.
- Identify transportation projects that have the least environmental impacts.
- Increase public participation in planning.
- Preserve natural resources.
- Develop better planning tools.
- Resolve issues in the planning process, before project development begins.
- Deliver projects more quickly through streamlining efforts.
- Provide an efficient Intermodal transportation system.

The PIP clearly demonstrates the promise of successful collaboration among federal, state and local agencies and the community. Through the leadership of MCAG, California has a model for relationship building among agencies and with the public.

The following is a summary of the accomplishments, lessons learned, primary elements and recommendations for future actions to other transportation officials that choose to embark in a similar effort:

Accomplishments

- Mutual understanding of resource agency regulations and policies on cumulative impact analysis.
- Opportunity to find common ground among resource agencies.
- More thorough cumulative impact analysis and environmental impact report.
- Projects that are more protective of important environmental resources.
- Environmental layers database started.
- 800% increase in public participation in the transportation planning process.
- 110 public meetings held (20-30 each quarter).
- 89% of participants said they enjoyed the PIP project.
- 89% of participants said they learned more about transportation issues.
- 30% increase in awareness of the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) among county residents.
- Increased participation from underrepresented groups.
- Better relationships were built at both the county and city level among civic organizations, agencies and residents.
- Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) was unanimously approved by the MCAG Governing Board and received no opposition during public comment periods.

Lessons Learned

- Go to where the people are instead of making them come to you. Instead of holding separate workshops, go to fairs, block parties, health clinics, etc.
- Hold mini-workshops at service clubs. Often they're looking for a speaker. Make it entertaining, packed full of interesting facts, colorful poster boards or PowerPoint presentations, then use a flip chart or questionnaire (or both) to invite and capture their input.
- Hold workshops at already established meetings (city councils, planning commissions, Area Agency on Aging, Farm Bureau, etc.).
- Plan "marketing" well in advance: press releases, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), Public Service Ads (PSAs), radio interviews, flyers in newsletters (such as Chamber of Commerce and Farm Bureau), and flyers in utility bills. Get your collateral (marketing pieces) together sooner than you think you will need them.
- Get your staff excited about the project. Often people in your organization are the last to know. Those that go to other meetings could take flyers with them or relay a key message to those they meet with.
- Find an elected official who is a project champion. This is extremely important. They can get others to meet with you and let agencies know their expectations of working together.
- Be honest about your team's strengths and weaknesses. For instance, if no one is a strong facilitator, use outside sources, as the conversation can easily get derailed.
- Spend more than the usual amount of time analyzing what you've collected. In your notes, capture those "after the vote" conversations that residents have. They often reveal valuable information, such as a misconception of a question.
- Discuss project expectations early on to avoid surprise at the end.
- Resource agency commitment is absolutely necessary. Your partners need to be at the table with you during the entire project for buy-in and collaboration. (Some key resource agencies did not participate even thought they indicated willingness to early on.)
- Not all Resource agencies were willing to share environmental data.
- There was a lack of trust of other resource agencies' data and sometimes even their own data.
- Personnel changes led to breakdown in agency relationship. Buy-in from top management is very important and may help alleviate this problem if it occurs.
- Public involvement is the key to a successful project but can be very time intensive.

- Resource agencies do not work at the plan level – this is a challenge.
- There is no assurance to transportation agencies that early involvement will ease project reviews at delivery stage.
- Widespread agency and public outreach, including underrepresented groups, has brought new issues to the surface and this ultimately resulted in an RTP that was more inclusive.
- By throwing our preconceived notions of what questions to ask, a plan can then be built on what is needed by the region. In this case, the community groups were asked to build a common vision for the county, and the RTP was ultimately built on that vision.
- Invite your detractors to the table. Recognize that they, too, have a viewpoint. You'll go through a stormy period, but, in the end, both sides will learn something new from the other and you'll have the foundation for a more positive relationship.
- UPlan/GIS is extremely helpful in communicating ideas on benefits and tradeoffs of land use decisions, particularly to elected officials and the public. (See the cumulative paper at the end for more information on this tool.)
- GIS modeling tools are able to highlight environmental considerations such as habitat linkages.
- While there has been some level of interest from resource agencies, stronger framework for coordination at the planning stage must exist at the federal and state level for real change to occur.

Primary Elements of the PIP

The following elements were necessary pieces of the process and enabled effective communication and outreach:

Choose a GIS model

PIP has and will continue to utilize existing database and GIS-based decision support tools to examine the interactions between land use and transportation in Merced County. These tools support scenario building for preliminary evaluation of the potential iterative effects of land use and transportation alternatives during the preparation of the RTP.

UPlan is an urban growth model (developed by the University of California Davis, Information Center for the Environment) that projects land development patterns, according to user-definable assumptions about densities, environmental constraints, and local land use plans. UPlan is used to assess the potential land development effects of specific road and rail projects. HePlan is a habitat evaluation and planning model that predicts the occurrence of habitat areas and allows users to scale their conservation preferences or goals with regards to potentially affected habitats. HePlan permits user definable rankings and weighting of resource values, and may be configured to reflect mandates of regulatory agencies and programs, or priorities of particular stakeholders. HePlan may be used with UPlan to create masks of areas where development would not be allowed due to prioritization of user scaled environmental concerns.

Both models are designed for project evaluation at city, county or watershed scales. Taken together, these models evaluate the effects of new facilities on land use and the impacts of the facilities and their consequent urban and rural land development effects on habitats.

For more information on UPlan and HePlan, contact Richard Green at MCAG or Mike McCoy at University of California Davis, Information Center for the Environment.

Cumulative Impacts

One expected outcome of the PIP was a strengthened, more coordinated cumulative impact analysis at the Plan stage. This was based on the premise that cumulative impacts are truly regional in nature, so the best time for considering them is at the Plan stage. It was also recognized that considering cumulative impacts during the Plan stage offers a far greater opportunity to avoid and minimize impacts to environmental resources, before alignment decisions for individual projects are fully developed.

To achieve this outcome, an interagency Cumulative Impact Advisory Panel was convened. The Panel consisted of members from MCAG, Caltrans, FHWA, USEPA, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the National

Marine Fisheries Service. Panel members met in facilitated workshops to learn from one another and reach agreement on an approach to analyzing and documenting the cumulative impacts of the Regional Transportation Plan. The Panel developed an outline for addressing cumulative impacts at the Plan state.

The Panel found that it is important to make use of modeling tools and GIS data to make cumulative analysis possible at the Plan stage. As modeling tools and GIS data become more readily available, the ability to analyze cumulative impacts at the Plan stage will continue to improve.

The Panel found that resource agency staff and regional planning staff are not familiar with each others' jurisdictions and goals and do not routinely coordinate with each other. It is valuable to invite resource agencies to provide scooping input, suggestions and GIS data layers for use at the Plan stage.

Also, it is important to communicate the purpose of the meeting clearly so that the right people attend. If an agency is merely sending "someone", and that someone can't express an opinion on the subject matter at hand, then the meeting is not productive and can even come to a standstill. Without engagement from those in attendance, future conclusions might be questioned.

Community Involvement/Public Participation

An important element of implementing a streamlined planning process is to involve the general public. Experience has shown that even the most fluid interagency planning process risks delays, increased costs and even litigation if the concerns of a local community are ignored or addressed too late.

By prospectively developing a plan to include the local community in its planning efforts, PIP tried to incorporate the public's opinions and comments at a point where they can actually make a substantive difference.

Ultimately, the desire to involve the public is recognition that successful projects are not solely defined by whether they have been completed "on-time" or "under budget". Rather, the definition of success also includes a consideration of whether the people who will be with the completed projects feel the process has been responsive to their needs, expectation and values. As such, the primary goals were to:

- Create community awareness within Merced County about the needs for its transportation structure.
- Ensure that the resource agencies understand the local issues, values and concerns related to the project that matter to each of Merced distinct communities.
- Educate the community about how their value preferences translate into results and to understand how to move forward to next steps.

In essence, throughout the entire process, the overarching theme was to ensure ongoing two-way (or multiple) communication between the Steering Committee, the agencies and the public.

Environmental Impact Report

MCAG prepared an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for its RTP pursuant to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The interagency Cumulative Impact Advisory Panel provided suggestions and feedback to the staff preparing the EIR about how to analyze cumulative impacts for the EIR. Caltrans senior environmental planning staff provided guidance on how to prepare the EIR in order to anticipate what would be needed late for project-level environmental analysis. The resulting EIR provided a very robust analysis of environmental impacts at the Plan level, setting the stage for faster, easier environmental processes for the individual transportation projects in the RTP. It is valuable to invite staff with project-level expertise (from transportation and resource agencies) to provide input to staff preparing Plan-stage environmental compliance documents.

Mid-Project Meetings

It is important to hold mid-project meetings to keep resource agency stakeholders up to date on efforts and keep them engaged. The California Department of Transportation Division of Environmental Analysis is a resource for engaging resource agencies.

Evaluation Process
It is important to evaluate what you've done and determine what the benefits are and if its worth doing such an intensive RTP process.

Additional Elements of the PIP

Stakeholder Agreement
The Steering Committee attempted to develop and have resource agencies sign a stakeholder agreement (similar to a memorandum of understanding) which failed. Some resource agencies were reluctant to sign the agreement and others couldn't get buy-in from management.

One-on-One Meetings with Resource Agencies
Prior to developing a memorandum of understanding for parties involved in the PIP, the steering committee held one-on-one meetings with key resource agencies in order to discuss the project and solicit buy-in. Setting up the meetings was very time intensive and not all of the key resource agencies were willing to meet with us. As a result, the developed memorandum of understanding was not signed.

Project Funding
It is important to get additional funding from interested/vested agencies for the project. It is estimated that the PIP project cost around $1.2 million. Primary funding for the PIP was contributed by US EPA, FHWA and Caltrans.

Recommendations for Future Actions

- Use this process for other RTPs.
- Continue further developing environmental database in the Central Valley.
- Expand to state agencies.
- Expand to federal agencies.
- Pool GIS data.
- Increase participation and commitment from permitting agencies.
- Promote habitat conservation planning.
- Promote regional environmental mitigation plans.

References and Resources

Merced County Association of Governments, Partnership for Integrated Planning website: www.mcag.cog.ca.us/

California Department of Transportation, Collaborative Planning website: www.dot.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/orip/Collaborative_Planning.htm

United States Environmental Protection Agency www.usepa.dot.gov

Federal Highway Administration www.fhwa.dot.gov

University of California Davis – Information Center for the Environment http://ice.ucdavis.edu/

Transportation Solutions: Collaborative Problem Solving for States and Communities. National Policy Consensus Center, 2003. www.policyconcensus.org

Similar integrated planning efforts in California:

Riverside County Transportation Commission – Riverside County Integrated Project http://www.rcip.org/

San Diego Association of Governments – Regional Comprehensive Plan http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?projectid=1&fuseaction=projects.detail

Sacramento Area Council of Governments – Regional Blueprint Plan http://www.sacregionblueprint.org/sacregionblueprint/

APPENDICES

1. Mare Island Accord Partnership Agreement – sample memorandum of agreement for resource agencies to work together

2. Transportation Goals for Merced County's Vision, Working Paper, June 2003

3. Partnership for Integrated Planning – Committee Diagram

4. Partnership for Integrated Planning: Merced Pilot Public Participation Plan

5. Merced Partnership in Planning – Community Involvement Plan

6. Partnership for Integrated Planning – Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel

7. Transportation Research Board article, *Regional Transportation Planning With a Difference: Expanded Environmental Analysis, Cumulative Impacts Analysis, GIS Growth Scenarios Modeling and Innovative Public Participation Energize Planning in Merced County, California*

8. Caltrans Journal, Jan-Feb 2002, Vol 2 – Issue 4 article, *Innovation: Partnership for Integrated Planning: Merced Pilot*

9. Merced County Association of Governments Quarter 1, 2003 Questionnaire: Vision of Merced County. Answers to the question asked at a public meeting, *"If Merced County were a person, who would that person be and why?"*

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

"Mare Island Accord"

Between

THE UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
Region 9
and
THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
Federal Highway Administration, California Division
and
THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Preamble

We, the undersigned, support the ongoing Partnership between the Environmental Protection Agency, Region 9 (EPA), the Federal Highway Administration, California Division (FHWA) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) on environmental and transportation issues and commit to furthering the process by support in staff time and available funding.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this Partnership Agreement is to support concerted, cooperative, effective and collaborative work among the three agencies in the transportation and environmental planning processes. The objective is for the partnership initiatives to result in each agency's understanding and appreciation of the importance and need for a safe and efficient intermodal transportation system and the protection and enhancement of the natural and human environment, while furthering the missions of all three agencies. Each agency will incorporate the objective of this Partnership Agreement into their respective strategic planning processes. On an annual basis, the Partnership agencies agree to assess the current initiatives and evaluate the opportunities for future collaboration on issues of mutual concern.

Commitments

In the spirit of cooperation and collaboration, and with the mutual understanding that this is a flexible working agreement among our respective agencies, we hereby commit to the following initiatives to achieve the objective for 2000 and beyond:

- Each Agency's senior management and staff will meet on a quarterly basis to discuss emerging problems, issues and priorities for each Agency, and to report on the status of the initiatives;
- Each Agency will assign a contact person, within their respective agencies, who will serve on a Steering Committee that will be responsible for setting the quarterly meetings, tracking status of the initiatives, and communicating results to internal and external stakeholders;

- The Agencies agree to establish a workgroup to implement a pilot project focused on developing and using planning tools to achieve environmental and transportation goals;
- The Agencies will reconvene the NEPA/404 Integration Process Monitoring Group to evaluate the MOU process and improve implementation;
- The Agencies will coordinate and collaborate on internal and external training and outreach to their respective stakeholders to support the purpose and objective of this partnership;
- The Agencies will pursue Interagency Rotational Assignments for their respective staff to foster improved communication and understanding between the three agencies;
- The Agencies will coordinate and share funding resources, where possible, to create synergies that support the objective of the partnership;
- The Agencies will work together to create guidance that integrates transportation and environmental planning (e.g. Regional Transportation Plan Guidelines);
- In the future, the Agencies will consider addressing additional initiatives, such as the development of cumulative and indirect impact assessment guidance, and the development of methods to assess regional water quality issues at the regional transportation planning level.

IN WITNESS THEREOF, the parties hereto have executed this Partnership Agreement as of July 14, 2000.

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
Region 9

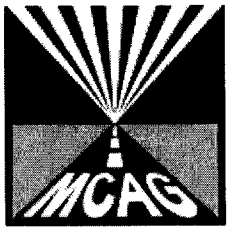
By: _____
Felicia Marcus, Regional Administrator

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
Federal Highway Administration, California Division

By: _____
Michael G. Ritchie, Division Administrator

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

By: _____
Jeff Morales, Director



Transportation Goals for Merced County's Vision

Working Paper
June 2003

Merced County Association of Governments
369 W. 18th Street
Merced, California 95340
(209) 723-3153
fax: (209) 723-0322
www.mcag.cog.ca.us

What is MCAG?

Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) is a regional planning organization working with local, state and federal governments. MCAG's purpose is to build consensus on regional issues such as transportation, solid waste, and housing needs. MCAG's role is to gather planning data, provide accurate information and coordinate an open and cooperative planning process that promotes good decisions for the region's future. A Governing Board comprised of elected officials from each of MCAG's member jurisdictions governs MCAG. The MCAG Governing Board is the final decision-making authority for adoption of regional transportation plans.

What is the Regional Transportation Plan?

The Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) is a detailed, multi-modal long-range plan for future transportation investments throughout Merced County. The update of the RTP will result in a blueprint for investing public revenues in our region's roadways, bikeways, bus, pedestrian, rail and aviation systems through the year 2030. The 2030 RTP will integrate the land use policies, and transportation elements of local cities, Merced County, our transit agency (The Bus) and the State of California. The 2030 RTP will also include a financial component identifying funding needs and revenue sources to implement the plan.

Who makes the decisions for MCAG?

The eleven-member MCAG ***Governing Board*** *is composed of all five members of the Merced County Board of Supervisors and one elected official from each of the six incorporated cities in Merced County, California.*

Kathleen Crookham, Chairperson, Supervisor, District 2, County of Merced
Michael Amabile, Vice-Chairperson, Mayor, City of Los Banos
Ed Abercrombie, Council Member, City of Atwater
Gloria Cortez-Keene, Supervisor, District 1, County of Merced
Deidre Kelsey, Supervisor, District 4, County of Merced
Mike Nelson, Supervisor, District 3, County of Merced
Jerald O'Banion, Supervisor, District 5, County of Merced
Joe Oliveira, Council Member, City of Gustine
Gurpal Samra, Council Member, City of Livingston
Bill Spriggs, Council Member, City of Merced
Jerry Westlake, Mayor, City of Dos Palos

I. Introduction

Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) began its 2030 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) planning process with a simple guiding question in mind: How can the region preserve and improve the transportation network in ways that respect the community's values?

To help answer this question, MCAG initiated an extensive, multi-dimensional public process. This process was designed to introduce value-sharing sessions, build upon the successes of previous planning efforts, include current knowledge about growth, resources and decisions already in place, and solicit public feedback throughout the planning process, from quality-of-life priorities to project selection. The first two phases of public involvement included a visioning session and a goal setting session. A diverse cross section of over 800 residents and business owners county-wide participated, generating an extensive volume of information concerning what people care about and how quality of life values relate to the transportation system. This public feedback was used in the creation of the *2030 RTP Vision and Goals.* The Vision and Goals provide an important foundation for developing future regional transportation projects and solutions.

Continuing opportunities for engagement in the ongoing dialogue about the region's long-range transportation future will occur as MCAG moves forward with the 2030 RTP planning process.

II. Growth Brings Opportunities: Putting transportation planning in context

The Challenge

The current transportation planning process has evolved in response to an array of complex transportation issues facing the MCAG region and in a context of rapid change, uncertainty and public debate over proposed transportation solutions.

Growth ~ Merced County has experienced rapid growth over the last 30 years, a trend expected to continue for the next 30 years. Assuming current growth trends, the region will add an estimated 230,000 people by 2030 for a total population approaching 450,000. The pattern of low density, spreading development is likely to continue, making mobility an even greater challenge. New growth is also expected in cities through in-fill and redevelopment and the revitalization of the downtown areas. Growth will add to current travel demand and will impact an aging infrastructure, as well as posing a threat to fragile wetlands, natural resources, and agricultural land.

Funding Shortfalls ~ In 2001, MCAG adopted a 2025 Regional Transportation Plan that shows $2.2 billion dollars are needed to maintain, operate and build the region's roadway, bicycle, transit, pedestrian, aviation and rail transportation networks to meet projected demand through the year 2025. During that same time, existing transportation funding is estimated at only $860 million. This $1.3 billion funding shortfall creates an enormous challenge. It also means that many needed projects and programs will remain unfunded. Funding needs and revenue figures will be updated for the 2030 RTP but the 2025 plan is illustrative of the magnitude of the funding challenge

Vision and Reality ~ Federal regulations require that MCAG update the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) every three years. In the early 1990's, federal legislation transformed the transportation planning process by requiring the RTP to avoid creating "wish lists" of projects that may never be implemented due to lack of resources. The RTP must include a realistic, financial plan that matches the costs and revenues available to implement the recommended projects and programs. This focus adds realism and accountability to the process, but can also be seen as restraining vision and creativity in the development of long-term transportation solutions.

Unsuccessful Tax Initiative ~ In November 2002, a transportation sales tax initiative was narrowly defeated with 61% of the voters voting in favor of the measure which required 66% to pass. While the reasons for the outcome of this election are varied and not the subject of this document, they have brought about a heightened level of debate that points to the need for a truly regionally-based transportation plan and funding solution.

The Opportunity

To address the complexities of the transportation planning context, MCAG developed a collaborative, community-based effort that brought diverse interests to the table to find mutual benefit. The effort started from scratch – both in terms of technical assumptions and public input, as described below:

Updated Planning Data ~ New planning data became available for use in the analysis, in the form of Census 2000 data, travel demand surveys and recent updates of local land use plans and zoning.

Starting with a Vision ~ To insure the 2030 RTP included vision and creativity, MCAG Governing Board set a direction for the RTP based on a willingness to think big and explore alternative long range community goals and values before developing financially feasible solutions.

Building Consensus on a Strong Foundation ~ MCAG's Governing Board also directed that the RTP build a broad, regional consensus through a collaborative planning process in which planners, elected officials and members of the community work closely together to engage people and groups that were often overlooked or underrepresented. The goal for using a community-based planning process includes creating public enthusiasm for participation in new ways and at greater levels.

Multi-Modal Perspectives ~ Although recent travel trends identified in the 2000 census have shown increases in the percentage of "drive alone" trips, there is a growing feeling throughout the community and its leaders that true alternatives to the automobile need to be developed with an appropriate mix of modes.

III. A Community-Based Planning Process

Formation of the PIP Advisory Committee

A broad-based Advisory Committee was established to guide the development of the 2030 RTP. This Advisory Committee membership represents each focus group and public sector individuals committed to meeting on a quarterly basis throughout the development of the plan. Each member brings a unique background and perspective to the process, from which they work as a group toward consensus on complex transportation issues. They are also charged with integrating public input themes throughout the decision-making process. The committee serves in an advisory capacity to the MCAG Governing Board.

The PIP Advisory Committee includes governmental and community members who represent:

- Elderly and Disabled
- Businesses/Education
- Youth
- Southeast Asian
- Hispanic
- Commuters/ Professional Drivers
- Agriculture
- Environmental/Outdoor Recreation
- MCAG's Governing Board
- MCAG's Technical Review Board
- MCAG's Technical Planning Committee
- MCAG's Citizen Advisory Committee
- Caltrans

Outreach Efforts

Successful transportation planning addresses people's values and their needs to connect to what they care about – family, work, worship, schools, recreation, shopping and entertainment. Public involvement for the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan was designed to better understand these important connections through its Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP) project.

Purpose and Scope

The Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP) is a multi-year effort designed to involve the public in each phase of the RTP decision-making process. The PIP was designed in cooperation with a Steering Committee made up of representatives from MCAG, Caltrans, Federal Highway Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, and endorsed by the MCAG Governing Board. The goal of the PIP is to build a regional consensus and achieve public ownership, acceptance and support of the RTP. To do so, the PIP uses:

- Broadly inclusive and geographically dispersed public involvement
- Multiple forums for public input and systematic collection and analysis of public input data
- Strategies for public education, on-going communication and feedback

- Strategies for including under-served populations and
- An initial effort to understand the connections between what people care about and how transportation can meet their needs for a desirable community and high quality of life.

Who Participated?

Phase I and II of the PIP process reached a diverse and geographically dispersed cross section of over 800 people including those from urban and unincorporated communities, high and low density neighborhoods, businesses, the young and old and people from a variety of racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Whether through attending a community workshop discussion, responding to a scientific telephone survey or filling out a printed or a Web questionnaire, participants talked about:

- Their values and vision for a good community with a desirable quality of life; and
- Their views on transportation related goals that relate to the vision themes.

Focus Group Members

Community leaders and volunteers from diverse organizations were asked to participate in Focus Group committees. These Focus Group members contributed community service hours, participating in meetings with their peers. This demonstration of civic leadership and willingness to partner with MCAG was effective in helping to build relationships, trust and understanding, and to create depth and breadth of participation.

The efforts of the focus groups, combined with surveys, questionnaires and community workshops, produced an extensive array of public feedback that provides a clear picture of what people in Merced County care about and how transportation can best serve their long-term aspirations for a high quality of life.

Participation Levels

How did people participate?

Over the past six months, MCAG provided three methods for gathering public comments and allowed for a wide range of regional interests to be heard. Different methods were used that could be compared and contrasted as a way to cross-check the data for discrepancies. Methods included a statistically valid telephone survey and a series of 56 community roundtables. A questionnaire was distributed through workshops and was available online.

The results of each method combined to provide a powerful database of region-wide public perceptions about quality of life and transportation needs. A description of each of these methods is provided below.

Telephone Survey ~ A statistically valid telephone survey provided a quantitative source of data. A series of questions were asked about values, current transportation system needs and issues and long-range solutions.

Questionnaire ~ Two questionnaires were provided, one each quarter. The first provided extensive background information to help develop vision themes, the foundation of MCAG's plan. The second questionnaire mirrored some of the questions asked in the

telephone survey, and provided additional information regarding ranking of transportation priorities. These questionnaires represented an additional qualitative source of public input data and was helpful in providing another way for people to express their thoughts. Questionnaires were distributed at speaking engagements, on the MCAG website, and at public meetings held between February and June of 2003.

Community Workshops ~ Each community workshop provided a facilitated, deliberative dialogue with a small group of people (typically between 8 and 15). Each workshop lasted about one hour during which participants generated a range of ideas, which were recorded, gave their opinions regarding the ranking of those ideas, and then voted using colored dots or by checking columns indicating high, medium or low importance.

To encourage open discourse and build trust in a comfortable atmosphere, the 56 workshops and focus group meetings consisted of people who had at least one important demographic element in common, such as age, ethnicity, neighborhood, or interest.

The community meetings consistently created thoughtful, reflection, lively, and creative discussion. Use of a facilitator provided a structure for conversation to unfold and assured that participants all had an equal opportunity to voice their ideas. Through the process, participants will continue to educate each other about their individual and group needs, and increase their understanding of common problems and the need for regional solutions. Establishing a common vision for Merced County and setting transportation goals were critical first steps to face the next challenging task of working together to find cooperative, mutually beneficial solutions.

IV. What Merced County Citizens Said:

What Are Our Values?

By listening to what people told us about their quality of life and their values, planners and decision makers can help ensure that plans stay on track and develop solutions that respect what people care about most. MCAG's public involvement efforts showed that, for our future, residents placed the highest importance on the availability of jobs within the county, preserving prime agricultural land and preserving the rural quality of life they now enjoy. While over a hundred vision themes were suggested, only six rose dramatically to the top, and across all groups.

The Top Six Vision Ideas:

- Full time employment with livable wages
- Preserve productive agricultural land and the quality of life that goes with it
- Do a better job of planning for the future, i.e. planned growth
- Have a good plan for clean air and water
- Provide a strong public transit system
- Provide a good road system with all the roads maintained

Other Key Themes

- Affordable housing with choices -- creation of healthy neighborhoods with mixed uses, respect for existing neighborhoods
- Well-trained, motivated, educated work force
- Safer communities
- Better education facilities
- Better planning and related leadership
- Preservation and protection of local environment and wildlife

How Does This Vision Relate to Transportation?

Following their feedback on values and vision for a desirable quality of life, participants were asked to relate those values to transportation needs and priorities with the question: "What are transportation related goals that support the vision themes? How do we preserve and improve our transportation systems in ways that respect our values?" A large degree of common ground regarding transportation needs and priorities was identified through all the public feedback methods used. The suggestions from the goal setting sessions are in included in the appendix. Further information on the public's views during workshops and focus group meetings, and questionnaire results are available online at www.mcag.cog.ca.us/pip or by calling the MCAG offices: (209) 723-3153.

V. Incorporating Public Comments: Vision and Goals Were Created

To incorporate public comments into the transportation planning process, MCAG staff categorized the information by issue and/or theme. Both summary and comprehensive reports of all the data were developed and distributed to decision-makers, planners and the 2030 RTP Committees for further review, discussion and/or comment. To create the *RTP Vision and Goals*, staff first assessed the concerns expressed by the community. The PIP Advisory Committee and members of other MCAG committees were also asked to express their unique viewpoints. Staff then compared the variety and range of information, synthesized key viewpoints and suggested goals related to each primary concern. PIP participants were then asked to add their own goals to the vision themes. Through the planning process, participants will be asked to connect the transportation related goals to the ultimate vision by identifying measurable objectives and ranking the feasibility of possible solutions. As the committee members and MCAG planners reviewed and assessed the public feedback data, it became apparent that much of the public wanted to understand the complexities of the planning process and of the often competing perspectives that need to be considered and balanced.

Understanding Needs Today and Tomorrow

The requirement to develop long-term regional transportation solutions was sometimes seen to contradict or conflict with the daily requirements of ordinary citizens, especially those whose livelihood depends on the county's largest industry: agriculture. Planners try to provide for the needs of a farmer who must move goods and wide machinery from his farm through ever-expanding communities to the major roadways as well as a new mother traveling to and from her work and day-care provider or a teen-ager taking a bus to school during the week and the movie theater on Saturday. Planners also try to provide for needs 30 years from now, when communities demand more housing, that mother is elderly and that teen is a working parent with responsibilities for children and elderly relatives of his own.

Balancing Local and Regional Needs

In the workshop discussions, participants provided hundreds of suggestions on both broad initiatives and specific projects. While they were, of course, concerned about local needs, they displayed a concern for regional issues so that a plan can be developed which provides broad regional transportation solutions that reach into the future.

Foundation for the Future

Public feedback was not only the foundation for the *RTP Vision and Goals* but also will help frame the community discussion of what project solutions are preferred, what quality of life trade-offs are acceptable to achieve regional mobility, and what residents, both individually and collectively, may be willing to pay for these transportation solutions.

VI. RTP 2030 Vision and Goals

The vision for the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan is that of an inclusive, people-focused plan to create an efficiently linked variety of transportation choices in a regional system that serves all people. This Plan will propose a transportation system that supports the following:

- Provide a good system of roads that are well maintained, safe, efficient and meet the transportation demands of people and freight
- Provide a transit system that is a viable choice
- Support full-time employment with livable wages -- i.e. support job creation & economic vitality
- Encourage preservation of productive agricultural land/maintain strong agricultural economy and the quality of life that goes with it
- Support clean air and water and avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to the environment
- Support orderly and planned growth that enhances the integration and connectivity of various modes of transportation

Specific goals and potential solutions related to each goal are described in more detail in the following pages.

Provide a good system of roads that are well maintained, safe, efficient and meet the transportation demands of people and freight

-Improve mobility and reduce congestion-related delays.

People mean many different things when they talk about mobility, yet a recurring theme was simply "it's getting harder to get there quickly from here." One of the region's primary mobility characteristics is a grid network of streets and highways that serve many needs well, but that is increasingly prone to congestion-related delays. Many people see that the long-term solution lies only partly in travel-reduction strategies. Moving people and goods from one edge of the region to another – be it north/south or east/west – remains a primary concern that must be addressed. Solutions suggested in this area included:

- Examine options to widen existing freeways and major routes
- Encourage ridesharing and other travel reduction strategies;
- Provide a beltway of roads around the city of Merced
- Stagger work times to decrease peak-period congestion;
- Eliminate turns and lanes that hinder the free flow of traffic;
- Synchronize lights from one end of a city to another

-Maintain the existing road system.

Planning for the ongoing maintenance of roads is an important part of the overall transportation picture. Whether it is resurfacing a road or repairing a sidewalk, one of the highest-return investments citizens can make is to keep the existing system functioning

at peak performance. The impacts of construction and repairs are also seen as seriously affecting system performance. Recognizing this, people suggested:

- Managing and maintaining existing roads to a fair or better condition;
- Implement systematic program of maintenance management for all roads; and
- Coordinating and reducing the length of time construction and maintenance operations require.

-Enhance safety for the traveling public.

Safety was a concern identified by many participants in the RTP public involvement process. Stretches of State Highway 99 in Merced County still have at-grade crossings. Combining that hazard with winter fog presents a precarious safety situation. Merced County is also unique in the number of trains that run through town on a consistent basis. The large number of railroad crossings present not only a direct hazard to drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists, but also an indirect hazard when trains prevent law enforcement and emergency vehicles from getting to their destination. A critical part of the planning process is to develop solutions that are not only efficient, but also help protect the most important resource of all: individual lives. Participants suggested:

- Eliminate at grade crossings on Highway 99;
- Separate railroad grades by providing an underpass/overpass:
- Divert traffic from local schools;
- Adjust speed limits through small communities to support a safe and efficient driving environment; and
- Create systems that allow emergency personnel safe and rapid access to all portions of the region.

-Promote an efficient, linked system of interstate freeways, major streets, rail lines, public transit, bikeways and pedestrian paths that enhances accessibility and the movement of people and goods and maximizes use of technological innovations.

Encouraging additional modes of mobility must occur in concert with a clear vision for regional infrastructure and development issues. PIP participants were concerned with building livable communities where people can live, work and play. Choices about how to handle new projects or improvements impact the environment, regional prosperity, jobs/housing balance and protection of natural resources. Suggestions from participants on creating efficient, mixed-use communities included:

- Integrate roads with rapid transit or light rail;
- Encourage greater density in existing built areas through local and regional infill development;
- Create a perimeter road system that goes around urban cores; and
- Encourage bicycle travel by paving shoulders to improve safety and reduce particulate matter, which will improve air quality

The same technology changes that are generating greater efficiencies in commerce and day-to-day living can also be leveraged to enhance mobility. By consciously planning to encourage technology, today's transportation system is positioned to take advantage of even greater efficiencies tomorrow. Thirty years ago, few would have imagined cars with global positioning satellite (GPS) technology, or vehicles that ran on a combination of gasoline and electricity. The public wants not merely to imagine the technologies of 30

years from now, but to plan a mobility system that is flexible and robust enough to adapt in the future. Public solutions offered in this area included:

- Use technology to assist in regulating traffic by synchronizing traffic signals;
- Create alternatives to the automobile culture;
- Encourage telecommuting; and
- Use technologically advanced vehicles.

One possible application of technology is in the area of alternative fuels. Although current alternative-fuel options exist, more can be expected in the future, as technologies such as fuel cells and solar power are refined and brought to market. While long-range mobility planning should account for these alternatives, steps can also be taken today to reduce reliance on traditional fossil fuels. In this area, participants' suggestions also included:

- Increasing vehicle fuel efficiency and/or increasing the use of alternative fuels;
- Encouraging use of fuel cell technologies as an alternative fuel source; and
- Providing incentives for private purchase and use of electric/hybrid vehicles.

Provide a transit system that is a viable choice

-Provide and promote the availability of an affordable, accessible, effective dynamic public transit system, responsive to current and future customer needs.
-Meet the individual needs of those who depend on public transit, such as the elderly, handicapped, youth and economically disadvantaged.

Public transit is seen as a key part of a long-range regional mobility solution. Public comment indicated broad support for transit in the community. Support was accompanied with a belief that the current system must be expanded to meet present needs and dramatically expanded to meet future needs. The region's current transit system serves a largely transit-dependent community of riders who rely on transit for education, training, employment, and medical destinations. A challenge in the years to come will be to attract increasing numbers of non-transit-dependent riders onto the system. To do this, the system must grow in capacity and service; it may also require the provision of different types of transit such as Bus Rapid Transit or light rail. Residents suggested:

- Increase run frequencies;
- Increase the hours of service;
- Improve the transit connectivity between communities;
- Provide better training to transit personnel, i.e. dispatch;
- Increase both the number of and quality of bus stops; and
- Improve marketing of the transit system to non-riders.

Support full-time employment with livable wages -- i.e. support job creation & economic vitality

-Recognize and respond to disparities in economic circumstances, accessibility and mobility among the region's diverse population and communities.
-Recognize and respond to the transportation needs of area employers.
-Promote transportation strategies that are innovative and market-based, encourage new technologies and support the economy.

Creating an efficient, sustainable transportation system through the year 2030 requires addressing issues regarding the movement of all residents – the young, old, disabled, and people from all racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Having access to jobs, education, health care, shopping, affordable housing and transportation services is a fundamental and shared quality of life value region-wide. The region's demographics are changing. Currently 25% of residents who are employed commute to jobs outside of the county. The fact that approximately 22% of Merced County's population currently lives below the poverty level provides another challenge. Many citizens want to attract employers to the region, but recognize that current transportation means and routes is not an attraction for them. Public suggestions included:

- Ensure access to jobs using an efficient commuter transit service;
- Encourage employers to locate within the county to reduce commuting;
- Implement bike lanes connecting to employment centers;
- Promote use of airports to attract business to the area;
- Promote flexible schedules, hours to reduce traffic congestion;
- Encourage telecommuting; and
- Provide transportation incentives to local businesses that expand the job base
- Encourage employers to offer incentives to employees for using alternative modes of transportation to and from work.

Preserve productive agricultural land/maintain strong agricultural economy and the quality of life that goes with it

-Preserve and enhance agricultural resources by implementing transportation improvements that avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to productive agricultural land.

One of the most critical issues facing California agriculture is its interaction with nearby communities and cities. Regions across the state are being forced to come to terms with how agriculture can be preserved in the face of increasing market, development and population pressures. Merced County is an agricultural based community. Many residents appreciate the agricultural influences on the quality of life in Merced County. Preservation of this element of the economy and lifestyle was identified as an important value to protect. Public suggestions offered in this area included:

- Maintain and improve farm to market access;
- Identify primary agriculture/produce routes that do not hinder general traffic flow;

- When implementing transportation projects, encourage and develop easement programs to preserve agricultural lands;
- Minimize agriculture land impacts by using existing road alignments where practical;
- Increase development density contiguous with existing development in urban areas; and
- Use the road system as borders around cities to promote green belts that encourage local agriculture systems and to shorten food to consumer distances

Support orderly and planned growth that enhances the integration and connectivity of various modes of transportation

-Provide a variety of transportation choices that strengthen and direct development towards existing communities, thus preserving open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas.

Regional growth does not have to mean unmanageable growth. Citizens questioned why communities are taking new land to expand, which often means duplicating resources, when there are many infill and upgrade possibilities within existing built areas. Citizens recognized that the current transportation system was not adequate to encourage alternate travel for residents in higher density areas. Public solutions offered in this area included:

- Add additional modes to the regional mobility mix, such as possibilities for light rail, increased air service, regional commuter rail or rapid bus;
- Increase transit options for those who cannot drive; and
- Improve bike and pedestrian access and facilities.

Public comment suggested that the flat topography of Central Valley communities and the good existing bicycle path system could contribute to a rise in bicycle travel as a form of mobility that is both environmentally friendly and personally rewarding. Bike travel takes vehicles off the streets, reduces air pollution and, for many, can be part of a personal health regimen. In order to accommodate and encourage bicycling, residents suggested several possible solutions:

- Add bike paths along roadways;
- Create more car-free areas for bicycling, such as bike paths;
- Educate drivers on how to safely share the road with bicyclists; and
- Maintain and improve bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

-Coordinate future land use patterns and transportation systems (aviation, rail, light rail, high speed rail, transit, bike and pedestrian paths, and roads) to foster economic prosperity, environmental protection and mitigation, trip reduction and the creation of efficient, integrated mixed-use communities.

-Encourage land and use and growth patterns that enhance the livability of our communities and maximizes the productivity of transportation investments.

Land use and managed growth are part of a vision that balances mobility with quality of life. But good stewardship – and good planning – is more complex than the competing issues of "pro-growth" or "no-growth". Mobility needs are influenced by how we use the

land, so it makes sense to base transportation planning on a foundation of thoughtful land use. Participants suggested:

- Support the clustering of homes, shopping and work locations together to minimize commuting distances and times;
- Undertake comprehensive land-use planning that takes a more progressive approach to determining how and where we grow and coordinating of the development of those plans with transportation planning; and
- Support livable communities through traffic calming measures.

Support clean air and water and avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to the environment

-Enhance environmental stewardship through protection of natural and human resources and creation or preservation of aesthetic amenities.

-Favor transportation investments that protect the environment including improving air quality, promoting energy efficiency and enhancing the quality of life.

Environmental protection extends beyond the transportation issue. Stewardship affects everyone. Merced County has a wealth of natural beauty. Planning for regional mobility carries a responsibility in the preservation and enhancement of the natural environment precisely because mobility impacts that environment at every level, from the land required to build transportation facilities to the pollution generated by internal-combustion engines. Specific opportunities mentioned in this area included:

- Make communities more walkable;
- Provide free transit during the smoggiest months of the year;
- Convert vehicles and buses to cleaner burning fuels;
- Encourage development and use of fuel cell technologies;
- When implementing transportation projects, protect wildlife and sensitive environmental systems;
- When implementing transportation projects, mitigate negative environmental impacts;
- Provide incentives for use of electric/hybrid vehicle; and
- Implement environmental enhancement projects in conjunction with transportation projects.

Funding

-Identify and allocate funding and resources for building, operating and maintaining the existing and future regional transportation system.

-Ensure that transportation investments are cost-effective.

Ultimately, mobility solutions are defined not merely by the scope and intelligence of transportation plans, but by the region's individual and collective ability to pay for those plans. Transportation funding suggestions ranged from gas taxes and sales taxes to toll roads, user fees and other ways to pay for new facilities. Many of the mobility solutions that appeal to much of the public, such as public transit, require an ongoing capital commitment. So, while not a separate vision theme, funding options is an issue that transcends all vision themes if they are to be realized. Solutions respondents recommended in this area include:

- Assess new development fees so that it pays its fair share in the cost of the improvements;
- Implement a legislative advocacy group to ensure that Merced County receives its fair share of state and federal funds;
- Create financial incentives to increase the use of alternative modes of transportation, such as free bus passes for seniors or for all on "Spare the Air" days

VII. Conclusions

The RTP Vision and Goals are guidelines that can be used to track precise objectives and implementable solutions that will move the region toward a shared vision. The picture of the regional community and its collective ideal for an effective transportation system that respects community values is constantly evolving. Reaching a point where constructive action can occur takes a lot of time and a clearly identified process. The first two sessions of the PIP process allowed for all major interests to be heard and common ground to be identified. It served as a catalyst for developing the *RTP Vision and Goals* and resulted in intangible benefits such as:

- A renewed sense of creativity and enthusiasm for engaging in a transportation dialogue
- A heightened level of awareness among a significant and balanced cross section of the population about the regional transportation planning process, issues under consideration, and of the community's shared interests and concerns
- A feeling of welcome and inclusion in government decision-making by groups who have been underrepresented
- Confidence that new public involvement techniques can be valuable for creating an atmosphere where all voices can be heard and people's concerns taken seriously
- Formation of many new relationships and community partnerships which open opportunities for shared responsibility for solving problems and implementing solutions
- Community conversations that strengthen the connections of citizens to each other and MCAG's connections to the community at large.

Because of this enthusiasm and public energy, issues that had not been on the radar screen surfaced and helped to generate new information and new possibilities. Issues that might have seemed to be foregone conclusions were given new perspectives and were open to any input. In short, nothing was "held sacred". To be sure, not every participant's suggestion will be used in the final plan, but together the input provides the values-based understanding that the best transportation planning effort requires.

What are the next steps for the 2030 RTP?

The 2030 RTP Phase I and II public input results will continue to be reviewed and considered as MCAG moves forward with plan development. Next steps include:

- Identifying the future transportation problems and their possible solutions
- Developing specific, measurable objectives and a range of transportation strategies and solutions to achieve each goal
- Packaging the solutions into a series of alternative transportation scenarios.
- Quantifying costs associated with and funding options for each transportation scenario
- Developing and distributing additional information to the public and decision makers about identified regional transportation issues, through educational events, newsletters and reports
- Continuing the public involvement to solicit comments on the alternative transportation scenarios and funding options

- Evaluating public feedback and developing a recommended alternative and associated financial plan
- Then, finally, soliciting public comments on the recommended alternative.

MERCED COUNTY
2030 REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLAN
VISION & GOAL STATEMENTS
SUMMARY

Provide a good system of roads that are well maintained, safe, efficient and meet the transportation demands of people and freight

- **Improve mobility and reduce congestion-related delays.**
- **Maintain the existing road system.**
- **Enhance safety for the traveling public.**
- **Promote an efficient, linked system of interstate freeways, major streets, rail lines, public transit, bikeways and pedestrian paths that enhances accessibility and the movement of people and goods and maximizes use of technological innovations.**

Provide a transit system that is a viable choice

- **Provide and promote the availability of an affordable, accessible, effective dynamic public transit system responsive to current and future customer needs.**
- **Meet the individual needs of those who depend on public transit, such as the elderly, handicapped, youth and economically disadvantaged.**

Support full-time employment with livable wages- i.e. support job creation & economic vitality

- **Recognize and respond to disparities in economic circumstances, accessibility and mobility among the region's diverse population and communities.**
- **Recognize and respond to the transportation needs of area employers.**
- **Promote transportation strategies that are innovative and market-based, encourage new technologies and support the economy.**

Preserve productive agricultural land/maintain strong agricultural economy and the quality of life that goes with it

- **Preserve and enhance agricultural resources by implementing transportation improvements that avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to productive agricultural land**

Support orderly and planned growth that enhances the integration and connectivity of various modes of transportation

- **Provide a variety of transportation choices that strengthen and direct development towards existing communities, thus preserving open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas.**
- **Coordinate future land use patterns and transportation systems (aviation, rail, light rail, high speed rail, transit, bike and pedestrian paths, and roads) to foster economic prosperity, environmental protection and mitigation, trip reduction and the creation of efficient, integrated mixed-use communities.**
- **Encourage land and use and growth patterns that enhance the livability of our communities and maximizes the productivity of transportation investments.**

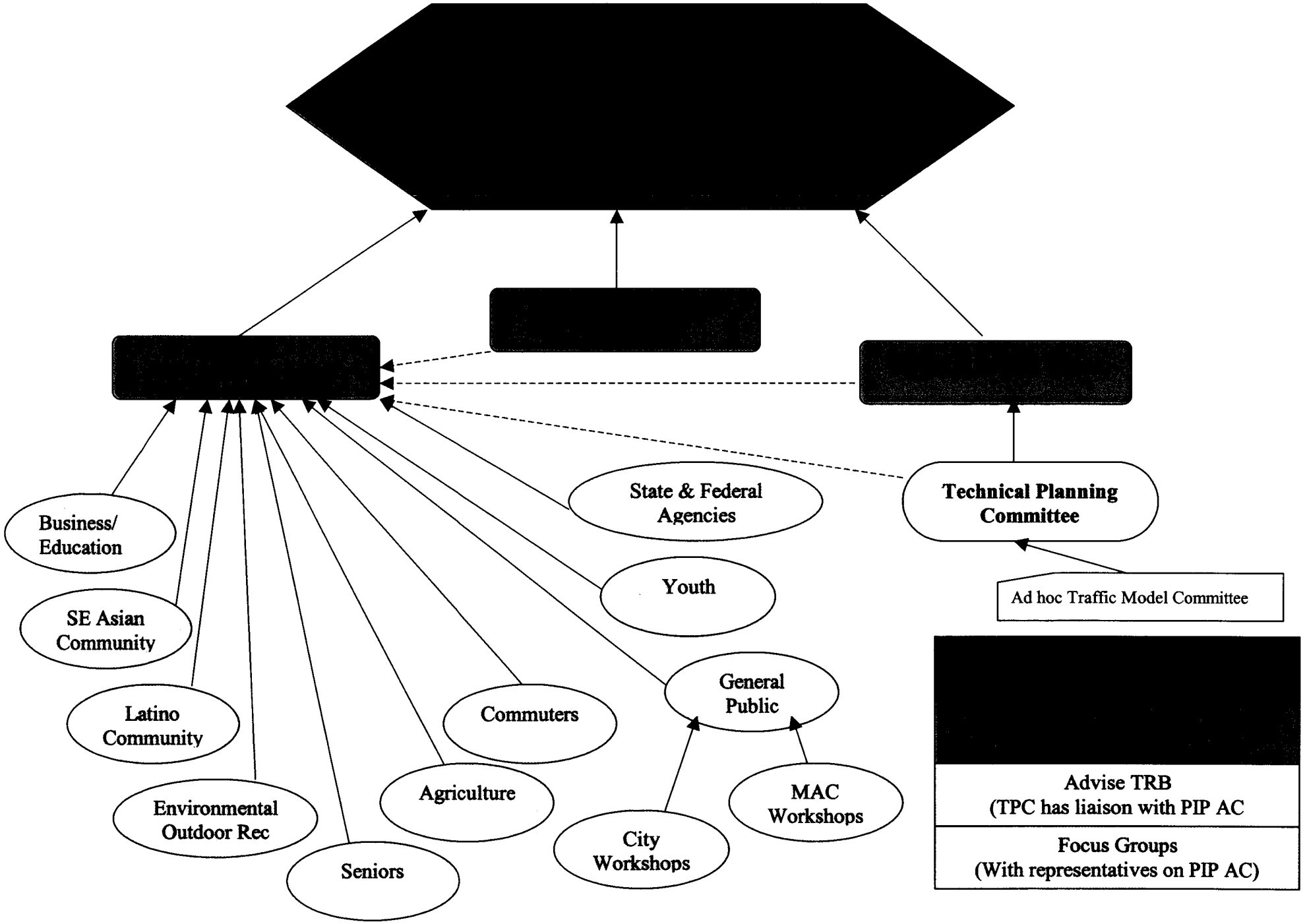
Support clean air and water and avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to the environment

- **Enhance environmental stewardship through protection of natural and human resources and creation or preservation of aesthetic amenities.**
- **Favor transportation investments that protect the environment including improving air quality, promoting energy efficiency and enhancing the quality of life.**

Funding

- **Identify and allocate funding and resources for building, operating and maintaining the existing and future regional transportation system.**
- **Ensure that transportation investments are cost-effective.**

Partnership for Integrated Planning – Committee Diagram



PARTNERSHIP FOR INTEGRATED PLANNING (PIP): MERCED PILOT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN

The Overall Project

The Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP): Merced Pilot is a cooperative, intergovernmental agency effort designed to improve regional transportation planning within Merced County. The thrust of the PIP is that promoting the early involvement of public and private constituencies affected by transportation infrastructure decision making will lead to improved and more efficient results.

While harmonizing the interests of federal and state agencies with overlapping mandates is a primary objective of the PIP, the participation of the local community throughout the planning process is critical to ensuring the ultimate success of large scale transportation projects.

This proposed community outreach effort is designed to incorporate the necessary element of community participation and awareness into the interagency partnership planning model. If successful, the Public Participation Plan will introduce the interdependent relationships between the environment, transportation, land use and urban development and will serve as a model for similar efforts in other regions of the state.

Merced County

Merced County is the pilot jurisdiction for this partnership effort. Located in the heart of California's Great Central Valley nearly 80% of its land are is agricultural use. The county's population is 210,000 (U.S. Census, 2000), 61% of whom reside in one of six incorporated cities: Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos and Merced. At 13.3% (2001), the unemployment rate in the Merced MSA is the 3rd highest in the continental United States. Continuing pressures on its west side from San Francisco Bay Area commuters and the 2004 opening of a new University of California campus in the city of Merced guarantee that substantial transportation decisions will need to be made over the next decade.

Objectives

PIP's goal is to design and partially implement an effective community outreach effort regarding environmental, resources and land use impacts stemming from transportation infrastructure decision making. The first step of this community outreach effort is to design a comprehensive "public participation plan" that is specifically tailored to Merced County's unique demographic and economic profile. While the public involvement plan framework will consider traditional outreach approaches, it will also assess the most effective means with which to reach underserved communities within Merced County.

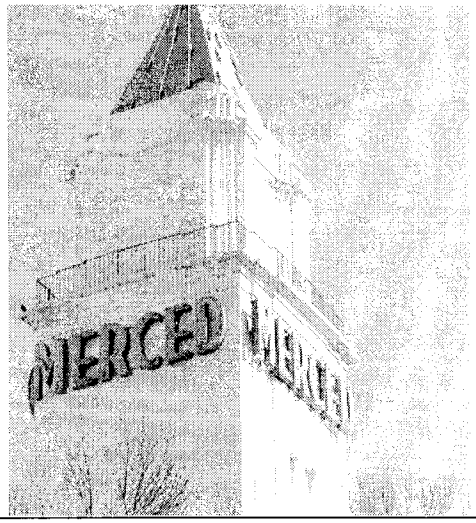
In its completed form, the public participation plan will serve as a roadmap for subsequent activity. To that end, it will lay the groundwork for a range of "outreach vehicles" including: newsletters, press releases, state and federal legislative staff briefings, editorial board visits, an online presence and, most importantly, community level workshops. Following review of the public involvement plan by the participating agencies, a recommended set of outreach vehicles will be carried out.

The goals of the PIP include:

1. Formulate a model regional transportation planning approach that may be used statewide and nationally.
2. Improve the delivery of transportation projects through early state and federal agency participation in the planning process.
3. Use and evaluate GIS tools to model urban development, habitat, and agriculture land use with transportation land use with transportation projects in the planning process.
4. Evaluate options for addressing project cumulative growth issues in the RTP.
5. Develop a progressive public education and involvement process grounded upon an inclusive energetic philosophy using innovative communication formats and media.

Deliverables

1. Merced Community Involvement Plan (also known as the Public Participation Plan) – Comprehensive document establishing a recommended strategy for broad based community participation within Merced County.
2. Newsletter model template and preliminary content – Replicable newsletter structure tailored to Merced County (e.g. bilingual); Design to be determined after consultation with local entities with past newsletter experience in Merced County.
3. Introductory PIP community outreach website – Non GIS-interactive website to design for online introduction of process to the community and program updates
4. Facilitated Community Workshop – Introductory community discussion group designed to encourage interaction and immediate public feedback. Will provide replicable model and materials.
5. Model/Portable Microsoft Powerpoint presentation and narrative – For use by participating agencies and PIP advocates promoting PIP for civic groups (e.g. Rotary, City Council)



Merced Partnership in Planning

Community Involvement Plan

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Background: The Mare Island Accord and the Merced Partnership in Planning

In 2000, senior leadership from the U.S. EPA Region 9, the Federal Highway Works Administration California Division, and the California Department of Transportation (CALTANS) formalized a future working relationship by participating in a signing ceremony at Mare Island, California.

This "Partnership Agreement" committed the three agencies to provide the necessary resources to further transportation and environmental planning processes in the State of California.

The objective of the Partnership is for each agency to understand and appreciate the importance and need for a safe and efficient transportation system and the protection and enhancement of the natural and human environment, while furthering the missions of each agency.

Merced County was chosen as the pilot jurisdiction for this new interagency initiative. The Merced County Association of Governments is the local contact agency for this effort.

Introduction: Why Involve the Community in Transportation Planning?

The goal of the Merced Partnership in Planning is to "streamline" the transportation planning process in Merced County. In practice, this means fostering early coordination and communication between the various state and federal agencies that might have some input during the development of any particular local project. The hope is that future road, transit, and improvement projects will proceed without unnecessary intra-agency disputes.

An equally important *element* of implementing a streamlined planning process is to involve the general public. Experience has shown that even the most fluid interagency planning process risks delays, increased costs -- and even litigation -- if the concerns of a local community are ignored or addressed too late.

By prospectively developing a plan to include the local community in its planning efforts, the Merced Partnership in Planning hopes to incorporate the public's opinions and comments at a point where they can actually make a substantive difference.

Ultimately, the desire to involve the public is recognition that successful projects are not solely defined by whether they have been completed "on-time" or "under budget". Obviously, the public ins Rather, the definition of success also includes a consideration of whether the people who will be living – for decades to come – with these completed projects feel the process has been responsive to their needs, expectations and values. As such, the primary goals are to:

- Create community awareness within Merced County about the needs for its transportation structure

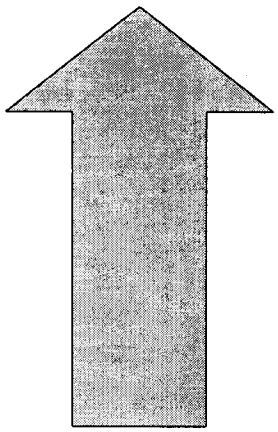
- Ensure that the MPIP agencies understand the local issues, values and concerns related to the project that matter to each of Merced distinct communities

- Educate the community about how their value preferences translate into results and to understand how to move forward to next steps

In essence, throughout the entire process, the overarching theme will be to ensure ongoing two-way (or multiple) communication between the Steering Committee, the agencies and the public.

It is important to distinguish the four types of public participation or "community involvement". As the MPIP pilot project revolves around development of a Regional Transportation Plan (a process that precedes actual final decisionmaking), the Plan's aim is to create a meaningful way for the public to *influence* the decisions that will define the plan.

Types of Community Participation	Public Information	Procedural Public Participation	Consensus Seeking Public Participation	Negotiation/ Alternative Dispute Resolution
Best Suited For:	Informing the Public	Meeting Legal Requirements	Fostering Public Influence	Seeking Actual Decisions



MPIP's public participation goal is to develop support and encourage public shaping of the RTP

A Note on Best Practices

Fostering community involvement is one element of a larger effort to develop and complete projects in an efficient, cost-effective manner.

However, the Merced Partnership in Planning recognizes that actually encouraging community involvement requires a planned strategy or approach likely to engage the diverse residents of Merced. To that end, the Partnership in Planning has developed this Community Involvement Plan. The plan should be updated and revised yearly.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLANS	MERCED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PLAN APPROACH
Clearly Defined Expectation of Accomplishments with Public	• Above average attendance at community meetings • Above average correspondence and communication with MCAG staff • Realistic input on specific projects related to the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)
Well-Integrated with Decision-making Process	• Outreach Plan's Calendar of Events coordinated with RTP Milestones
Targeted at segments of public most likely to see themselves impacted by the decision (Stakeholders)	• Plan identifies 6 stakeholder groups unique to Merced County
Involve interested Stakeholders in every step of decision-making, not just the final stage	• Outreach Plan's Calendar of Events coordinated with RTP Milestones
Provide Alternative levels of participation based upon the public's level of interest and the diversity of those participating	• Plan contemplates multiple outreach methods • Plan includes targeted messages for stakeholder groups
Provides genuine opportunities to influence the decision	• Process includes means for feedback to MCAG staff
Takes into account the participation of internal stakeholders as well as external stakeholders	• Plan's structure includes PIP steering committee liason to Citizen's Advisory Board • Plan's contemplates Regular updates to PIP Steering Committee

Process: Outreach as a Team Effort

The development of a Community Involvement plan is a team effort between the Steering Committee, state and local agencies and the community. The benefit of a team approach is that multiple sources of information regarding strategies and tactics particular to Merced County will lead to a broad and effective final product. This plan favors more engagement rather than a "top down" approach. In pursuit of that goal, development of the plan incorporate the following required sources of information.

NECESSARY INFORMATION FOR SUCCESSFUL INVOLVMENT PLANS	MERCED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PLAN APPROACH
How the schedule will be determined and who the decision maker is	• Schedule determined by MCAG in cooperation with PIP Steering Committee
Organizational constraints on the public participation program	• Plan recognizes funding is not infinite and approaches outreach in multiple stages • Plan recognizes staffing for actual outreach will rely heavily on MCAG staff • Travel distances from PIP Steering agencies to Merced County limits in-person agency participation to some degree
How this process could impact other existing programs	• Successful implementation of plan will provide model for similar efforts in other parts of the county
Issues that are likely to arise	• Interviews related to transportation planning controversies or problems held with PIP Steering Committee members
History of these issues	• Interviews related to transportation planning controversies or problems held with PIP Steering Committee members
Who from the public is going to be interested in this decision	• Plan identifies stakeholder groups based on analysis of demographic data for Merced County
Most effective participation approaches	• Interviews related to effective approaches will be taken to members of stakeholder groups for comment

Community Profile: Who is Merced?

Located in the heart of California's Great Central Valley, Merced County is a flat, open expanse with nearly 70% percent of its 1.2 million acre land area in farmland. Indeed, Merced's $1.5 billion (1999) agricultural industry is the fifth largest in the state and employs more workers than any other sector of the local economy. The county's major commodities include milk, almonds, chickens, cotton, tomatoes and alfalfa.

At 17.8%, the unemployment rate in the Merced MSA is the 3rd highest in the continental United States and like most Central Valley counties, more than double the state average. After agriculture, local government activity is the next largest employer.

In the ten year period between 1990 and 2000 Merced's population grew 18% to 210,000 people. Of that total, 61% live in one of the counties six incorporated cites: Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos and Merced (the county seat). The California Department of Finance projects the County will grow 25.8% by 2010 – outpacing the projected state average of 18%.

Additionally, pressures on the county's west side from San Francisco Bay Area commuters combined with the planned 2004 opening of a new University of California campus in the city of Merced that substantial transportation decisions will be made in Merced over the next decade.

Merced County Unemployment Rates: Among the highest in California

MERCED COUNTY	**17.8%**
CALIFORNIA	**4.5%**
Atwater	16%
Delhi	17.8%
Dos Palos	25.8%
Gustine	15.9%
Hilmar-Irwin	13.9%
Le Grand	15.6%
Livingston	27.9%
Los Banos	17.1%
Merced	17.7%
South Dos Palos	50.6%
Winton	22.7%

Workforce Characteristics: Lower Wages across the board

	Merced County	California
Average wage per job	$22,856	$36,815
% of Population below Poverty	25.4%	16.0%
% of High School graduates eligible for UC/CSU	23.4%	35.6%
High School Dropout Rate	2.0%	2.8%
Average SAT Score	946	1005

"Civic Participation": Lower than state average

Most important for a public participation is the extent to which the community already engages in civic activities. As indicated below, within Merced County, the effort will require a good amount of time and resources.

	Merced County	California
% of Registered Voters (1998)	48.8%	57.6%
% of eligible voters who voted (1998)	37.6%	41.4%
% of 200 income tax returns with voluntary contributions	0.5%	0.9%
% of residents who responded to 2000 US Census	70	70

Population: Increasingly Latino and Southeast Asian

Merced County, like much of the Central Valley, has a rising Latino population as well as an establish Hmong population within Southeast Asian community. In addition, the character of Merced County skews much younger than the state average. Merced County citizens are more likely to be under 18 or between the ages of 18-34.

Racial and Ethnic Makeup Comparison (2000)

	Merced County	California
White	39%	59.5%
Hispanic	31%	32.4%
Asian	5%	10.9%
Black	3%	6.7%
Other	18%	17.5%
Two or More Races	4%	4.7%

Target Interest Groups

Based on a consideration of the Merced County's population, an effort will be made to target outreach through distinct groups. The PIP outreach database should be searchable and classified by the following six constituencies:

1. Merced County's Formal and Informal Political Leaders

This group includes the mayors and city councils of the county's incorporation cities, Merced County Supervisors, and local organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Merced College, the Chamber of Commerce (city and county), South Merced Neighborhood Group, the Private Industry Council, Merced Boosters and the Building Industry Association.

2. Merced County's Agricultural Community

This group includes local agricultural organizations and the memberships of groups such as Merced County Farm Bureau, Merced County Farmlands and Open Space Trust, California Women for Agriculture

3. Merced County's Youth

This group is defined as young people between the ages of 14 and 17 attending school in Merced County.

4. Merced County's Latino Community

Outreach to the Latino community will be done through formal Latino organizations based in Merced, such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

5. Merced County's Asian Community

The Asian Community will be reached through organizations such as Merced Lao Family Community Inc.

6. Merced County Commuters

This group focuses on the western Merced County residents commuting to the Bay Area and includes users of Merced RideShare and members of Los Banos' Commuter Alliance.

Proposed Merced Stakeholder Questions

In developing the message for targeting particular groups within Merced. The following questions will form the basis of interviews with identified stakeholders.

1. What issues do you think are likely to arise within your community with respect to transportation?

2. What mode of transportation does your community primarily rely on?

3. Is there any history of transportation issues or conflicts within your community?

4. Who within your community do you envision being most interested in transportation decisions?

5. What media do you think are most of your particular community gets its information from?

6. What would be an ideal location or venue for a community open house?

7. How effective have newsletters been in keeping you aware of local government issues in Merced?

8. We are considering holding open houses for the community related to transportation. When, in your opinion, is the best time -- for your community -- of a typical week to hold one?

9. How difficult do you think it will be to introduce the topic of transportation planning to your community?

Outreach Tools

A number of information tools are available for use by the MPIP outreach plan. As a rural community, this plan recommends MPIP adopt a strategy geared towards presentations, online access, open houses and press releases followed up with radio and the print media as be the primary outlet. Further on in the process, the Steering Committee might consider expanding the website into a more interactive vehicle, billboard advertising. This should be investigated within a year.

A summary of recommended tools for MPIP with discussion where appropriate.

Existing Public Infrastructure

Briefings for Local Government Agencies

To Do: Identify Local Government Groups of Interest

Public Hearing Presentations

Establish MPIP Information Booths in Public Facilities such as libraries and similar public spaces.

To Do: Investigate cost of incorporating user friendly computer terminal to supplement booths

Traditional Media

News, television and radio releases

To Do: Compile List of Press Contacts for Merced County for Appendix

Newspaper Inserts Section

To Do: Establish cost for Free-Standing Newspaper Insert in Merced Sun-Star

Online Access

A website geared towards engaging the general public will be established under the domain name "planmerced.net". Information regarding Steering Committee activity will continue to be available to PIP members on the existing PIP site. However, the new site will allow community members to submit comments, stay informed and be engaged in the planning process.

Tri-lingual 1-800 Information line

A Tri-lingual 24 hour free call 1-800 line should been established where the community can call to hear updates on issues of concern, request information or register a comment. If the phone is unattended, please leave a message and we will call you back as soon as we can.

Periodic Tri-lingual Newsletter

To do: Finalize cost estimate

Press Kit for Local Media

Local Cable Access

Public Service Announcements

To do: Compile list of Public Service Announcement media contacts for appendix

Grassroots Approaches

Fact Sheets

Small Group Meetings

To do: Compile list of local and ethnic service organizations.

School Visits

To do: Establish contacts and process for School visits

Mail in Response Forms

To do: Talk with MCAG about which parts of RTP require simple public responses

Advisory Groups tailored specifically for transportation

To do: Ask MCAG to what extent Citizen's Advisory Group covers other issues

Site Tours

To do: Is this feasible for legal liability reasons?

Neighborhood Notices and Flyers (Trilingual – Spanish, English, Hmong)

A newsletter will be released at the beginning of the outreach. Newsletter 1 will provide information on MPIP's background. Newsletter 2's content is to be determined. Recipients will be encouraged to respond to those newsletters with ideas and information.

Community Information Open Houses/Workshops

A community information evening will be held with the goal of:

- providing the community with an understanding of transportation planning process
- provide the community with some background information
- provide the community with an understanding of the scope of the studies to be undertaken
- define the issues which need to be considered
- canvass any other ideas relevant to the project

Preferred Community Involvement Activities

Activity	Responsibility	Completion
Prepare Model Introduction to PIP Powerpoint Presentation	Richard Cummings (GVC)	June 12,2002
Produce Structure for Model Newsletter	Richard Cummings (GVC)	June 28, 2002
Produce Model Press Release Structure	Richard Cummings (GVC)	June 28, 2002
Open House to Introduce PIP to Public	Steering Committee, Facilitator, MCAG	TBD – August 4, 2002
Develop PIP Information Booths/Display Boards	MCAG?	July 30, 2002
Develop Newspaper Insert	MCAG/PIP	July 30, 2002
Web site creation	Richard Cummings, (GVC)	July 30, 2002
1800 Information Line	TBD	TBD
Press Kit for Local Media	TBD	TBD
Public Service Announcements	Script by GVC, TBD	Begin running July 15, 2002

Future Activity

Establish a PIP Liaison to the Citizen's Advisory Committee

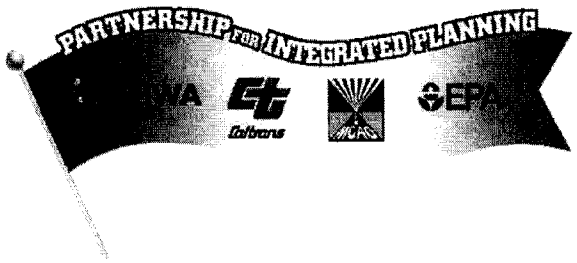
Merced County currently has a Citizen's Advisory Committee. (CAC) This plan proposes that a specific member of the PIP Steering Committee be assigned as a point of contact with the specific purpose of assessing whether messages and information related to the process are being received properly. The liason will provide the steering committee with monthly updates on the impressions and concerns of the CAC.

Considerations to be reported back to the Steering Group:

-Quality of media outreach
-Quality of Facilitators
-Feedback on responsiveness

Reinforce PIP Outreach Staff with Community Outreach refresher course

Funding should be identified The Communicating with the Public course is designed to improve skills in making interesting and effective presentations, communicating in a credible manner about risk issues, handling emotionally charged questions and statements from the public during public meetings, and communicating with diverse audiences.



Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP): Merced Pilot

Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel
2002-2004

Merced Partnership for Integrated Planning
Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel

Overview

Background

- **History of Program**
- **UPlan**
- **Cumulative Impacts Analysis Component**

The Panel Experience

Reflections on the Panel's Effort

- **Reflections from the Coordinating Team**
- **Panel Reflections**

Evaluation

Appendices

- A) **Panel Roster**
- B) **Panel Outline**
- C) **Matrices**
  1) **Cumulative Impacts: Agency Roles, Regulatory Requirements and Definitions**
  2) **Cumulative Impacts: Regulatory Framework**

Overview

The Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel (Panel) was an interagency group convened to address agencies' mutual concerns about cumulative impacts analysis for transportation projects. The Panel met in a series of facilitated meetings to discuss ways that cumulative impacts could be addressed more effectively during regional transportation planning. Panel members came from regional, state and federal agencies (see Appendix A). The Panel met from February to November 2003, producing an Cumulative Impacts Analysis Outline of considerations for how to analyze the cumulative impacts of a Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) (see Appendix B).

The Panel focused its efforts on assisting the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) with the analysis of the cumulative impacts of MCAG's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). In this way, the Panel became one of the components of the Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP). The PIP program, implemented as a pilot in Merced County, California, is an innovative approach to early and collaborative engagement by federal, state and local agencies interested in ways to better integrate transportation, land use, and environmental planning. MCAG provided PIP with a real-world application for piloting early collaboration.

It was anticipated that the Panel's effort would result in recommendations for how to improve cumulative impacts analysis at the plan level. For PIP in particular, the Panel's recommendations would be used to improve the cumulative impacts analysis in MCAG's Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for its RTP. MCAG must prepare an environmental document for its RTP to comply with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Background

History of Program

In 2000, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) entered into an historic partnership agreement to support cooperative and collaborative work in transportation and environmental planning processes. The Mare Island Accord stresses early coordination, cooperation, and an effective environmental process that incorporates environmental concerns, multi-agency participation in program level planning, increased flexibility of funding, and the opportunity to resolve issues before costly project development.

One of the partnership activities of the Mare Island Accord was the initiation of a pilot project with a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), focusing on the development and use of planning tools to achieve environmental and transportation goals. This activity took the form of PIP in Merced County. MCAG was preparing for the revision of its three-year RTP, an effort that was well suited for the kind of collaboration and early engagement envisioned by the Mare Island Accord, and it agreed to participate in the Mare Island Accord pilot.

UPlan

One of PIP's components was to pilot the use of Global Information Systems (GIS) technology to improve regional transportation planning capabilities. The Information Center for the Environment (ICE) at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), was contracted to assist the PIP pilot with the development of a GIS-based decision support tool. ICE customized an urban growth model developed at UC Davis called UPlan, a model used to evaluate the land development impacts of transportation projects.

UPlan develops growth scenarios by overlaying GIS data layers to predict land use allocation and patterns in the most attractive and least environmentally damaging areas. The model allows the user to test the effects of land use and transportation policies and analyze environmental impacts. The user sets certain features based on assumptions regarding attractions and discouragements to growth; some of these assumptions are standard modeling principles. The user also sets features to buffer or mask protected areas so the model does not allocate growth there. For instance, a user would buffer a resource such as a wetland, or mask a current urban area that is already built out, so the model would not allocate growth in those areas.

This holistic look at the effects of transportation and land use decisions makes it particularly well suited for cumulative impacts analysis. It allows cumulative impacts to be explored in a way that is not typically available without the use of GIS modeling, largely because of its extensive use of data.

MCAG's use of UPlan provided a broad look at the projected footprint of growth in Merced County. Data layers were compiled from many sources, including resource agencies that were invited to contribute data layers and provide rankings of resources to help MCAG know the agencies' priorities. This information was represented in the settings applied in UPlan and reflected in the scenarios that resulted. The outreach to resource agencies for input on data and rankings was a new way to bring resource agencies into the RTP development process. It was a part of PIP's early collaboration. MCAG analyzed the different scenarios generated by the model. Potential effects, including cumulative impacts, were then compared to a status quo or no-change alternative of the RTP. The results were presented in the EIR.

The Panel found that UPlan or a similar GIS-based tool is invaluable for plan-level cumulative impacts analysis for many of the reasons noted above, in particular its broad, regional approach to representing data; its ability to overlay many kinds of data at a regional level; and its increasing practicality in terms of cost and access. The Outline (see Appendix B) provides specific suggestions as to how GIS-based data can be useful for plan-level cumulative impacts analysis.

The Cumulative Impacts Analysis Component

ICE was also contracted by Caltrans to develop and facilitate the meetings of the Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel. Panel members were drawn from the agencies that most commonly prepare or comment on cumulative impacts analyses. The project period was July 1, 2001 to

April 1, 2004. ICE convened the Panel, and a facilitator from Common Ground: Center for Cooperative Solutions, at UC Davis Extension, facilitated the group discussions as a subcontractor to ICE. ICE conducted administrative and management tasks under the contract, including ongoing project management, budget and contract management, report preparation, and coordination with the Caltrans project manager and the Panel facilitator.

The intent of the cumulative impacts analysis component was to conduct a series of workshops or group meetings to:

- Discuss cumulative impacts terminology, roles and responsibilities
- Address traditional problems in cumulative impacts analysis and mitigation
- Develop an approach for conducting cumulative impacts analysis in the EIR for the RTP, based on Panel members' collaborative input, and applicable to a plan level analysis

The Panel Experience

The planning and logistics for the Panel meetings were arranged by ICE in coordination with Caltrans' task order manager, who was also a Panel member. Once the meetings were under way, the facilitator also joined this coordinating team. Preliminary work consisted of identifying Caltrans' and MCAG's interests and needs, developing objectives for the effort, and brainstorming about the integration of the workshop results with the larger PIP project. The coordinating team then began to focus on agency participation and workshop design and content. As the workshop planning took place, it became clear that a workshop format would not achieve the desired outcomes: it would entail assembling a large group and using a presentation-based format. Instead, the desired results would be better achieved in a smaller group setting, using a more conversational and interactive format. Out of this came the decision to hold a series of facilitated meetings among a small group of high level staff from key federal and state agencies involved with cumulative impacts analysis. The idea of conducting "facilitated conversations" about cumulative impacts analysis took shape.

The next phase of project development involved identifying and securing the commitment of agency participants. The coordinating team identified and prioritized the key agencies it wanted to participate in the Panel, with input from the PIP Steering Committee. The selection was based on the degree of involvement these agencies had historically shown in the analysis of cumulative impacts for transportation projects. Once these agencies had been identified and prioritized, the coordinating team sought suggestions for potential agency representatives to the Panel, and ICE worked toward securing a commitment of participation. The Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel (Panel) was convened in February 2003, with staff from Caltrans, EPA, FHWA, MCAG, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - Fisheries (NOAA Fisheries), and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) (see the roster in Appendix A).

ICE planned and organized a total of eight Panel meetings (six 1-day meetings and one 2-day meeting). With the exception of one meeting, held at MCAG's offices in Merced, California, the meetings were held on campus at U.C. Davis.

While the coordinating team provided a framework to guide the effort, it recognized the importance of giving the Panel an opportunity to develop its own goals. One of the Panel's first tasks was to develop a mission statement to guide its work. The coordinating team was initially interested in exploring the potential for developing some kind of statewide policy regarding cumulative impacts analysis, but that shifted as the mission statement took shape. The Panel chose not to take on the task of formulating statewide policy: members were not authorized to promulgate policy; several members represented offices that did not have jurisdiction over the entire State; and the sheer scope of such an undertaking was deemed unrealistic within a limited time frame. The Panel had substantive discussions about an appropriate and reasonable mission and set of objectives. Given the timeframe, context, and Panel membership, its considerations included:

- What was a feasible, realistic goal for the group?
- What were the perspectives of the different agencies regarding cumulative impacts analysis?
- What were MCAG's needs in preparing the environmental documents for its RTP?
- What was the original concept for this effort?

Arriving at a mission statement that reflected the collective sense of what should be the Panel's work proved to be the Panel's first challenge. The mission statement went through several iterations before arriving at the following final version:

> "The mission of the Cumulative Impacts Advisory Panel is to develop guidelines tailored to regional planning level cumulative impacts analysis, including a methodology for identifying mitigation responsibility for potential impacts and possible mitigation strategies for application to the Merced Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP) pilot process."

The Panel decided its approach would be to develop guidance for MCAG in preparing the cumulative impacts analysis for its RTP environmental document on a *regional basis* at a *planning level*, both of which are unprecedented approaches. Cumulative impacts are usually analyzed during the programming and environmental evaluation of individual projects. Resource and regulatory agencies review cumulative impacts analyses as part of their project-level environmental reviews. At that phase, individual projects are already well framed, modifications are more difficult, and it is harder to discern the relation of an individual project to other actions in the region.

The mission adopted by the Panel matched well with the original intent of the cumulative impacts analysis effort which recognized the RTP as an excellent opportunity to analyze cumulative impacts: the scope of cumulative impacts analysis is properly regional; it allows for modification of alternatives if significant cumulative impacts are identified; and, project-level analysis can refer back to and build upon regional plan analysis. Also, use of UPlan and early collaboration with participating agencies meant that data needs would be identified and met in a more comprehensive and coordinated manner.

The focus on MCAG in the mission statement gave the Panel a practical task with a limited

scope. The task also took on a human dimension through MCAG's participation. Other members' interest in learning more about MCAG and finding ways to help the MCAG Panel member also increased their willingness to participate, and on many occasions it also helped the Panel refocus its discussions.

The Panel chose to prepare its guidelines in the form of a recommended outline for plan-level cumulative impacts analysis. While the outline was designed with MCAG in mind, the Panel took care to word the outline so that other agencies would also be able to apply it to their own plan-level analyses. In crafting the outline, the Panel attempted to develop an approach and methodology to better address environmental concerns and the requirements of reviewing agencies at the plan level, while still providing reasonable and appropriate analysis.

The Panel's work was conducted in an unfamiliar context; that is, many of the Panel members were well acquainted with project-level review of cumulative impacts, but they were not familiar with the RTP process, while the members that knew about RTPs were not familiar with cumulative impacts analysis. As a result, each of the members was in a learning environment. One striking aspect of this learning environment was the participation of the federal agencies. While these Panel members did not have jurisdiction over the EIR that MCAG was preparing pursuant to CEQA, they valued the opportunity to explore how cumulative impacts could be more effectively addressed at a regional plan level.

As the Panel developed its mission and workplan, it also reviewed and discussed cumulative impacts definitions, the different agency roles in cumulative impacts analysis, and the regulatory framework. These were valuable steps in providing mutual education of Panel members and beginning the effort with a common understanding of the context and issues. The information provided by Panel members and through the research conducted was summarized in two matrices (see Appendix C). Other information provided to the Panel to assist in their discussions were a synthesis of background materials about cumulative impacts analysis, a list of acronyms, a glossary, and material on existing cumulative impacts analysis guidance. The Panel also reviewed other guidelines, protocols and methods as it developed its guidance document for MCAG; the Panel did not want to reinvent the wheel or duplicate other recent efforts at developing guidance.

The Panel member from MCAG made two presentations that provided important background information to the other Panel members. The first was a briefing on Merced County and MCAG's RTP process, which was new to most of the other Panel members. The second presentation showed how MCAG was using data from UPlan in its public outreach meetings, and how this was helping with the development of the scenarios (alternatives) for the RTP.

As the Panel's work progressed, Panel members turned their attention to the EIR itself. Caltrans had arranged for one of its District staff to prepare MCAG's EIR. The Panel initially asked the EIR writer to attend as an as observer, to listen to the discussion and incorporate the Panel's ideas into the development of the EIR. In short order, however, it became clear that the writer had a more meaningful role to play. The writer contributed valuable feedback about the practicality and feasibility of the recommendations being proposed in the Outline. This was

important for Panel members to hear and often resulted in productive discussion and wording changes to the guidance. The Panel's work was much more grounded in reality because of the writer's participation.

The development of a Cumulative Impacts Analysis Outline as the guidance document evolved from the review of existing materials that had been distributed to the Panel. As a starting point, the Panel turned to an outline that had been developed at an FHWA Western Territory Cumulative Workshop held in 2001. That document served as an initial foundation for the guidelines the Panel sought to develop. The Panel began with the resource areas listed in that earlier outline and then modified and expanded on that list. Ultimately, the Panel crafted and shaped its own outline (see Appendix B). In the process of developing the content of the outline the Panel discussed each resource area in turn, seeking consensus about definitions, the appropriate scale of analysis at a plan level, the appropriate type and extent of information, and methodologies.

Several iterations of the Outline were developed. Some of the more challenging questions and issues that arose involved criteria for cumulative impacts analysis at the plan level: when is enough data enough? Questions surrounding temporal boundaries and baseline determination spurred hearty discussion among the members. The Outline reflects the Panel's best attempt to grapple with the essence of many of these questions and arrive at mutually acceptable language that represented and respected the different agency needs and missions.

Before finalizing the Outline, the Panel members requested their agencies to review and comment on the draft Outline. Several agencies provided feedback, which was incorporated into the final version of the Outline.

Reflections on the Panel Effort

Reflections from the Coordinating Team

ICE, the Caltrans task order manager and the Panel facilitator noted the workings of the Panel. Members worked together very well, reached agreement on issues early on, brought the right mix of expertise and background to the table, and were individually committed to the project. The Panel engaged in robust discussions that were illuminating, engaging and productive. Comments offered by Panel members suggest this was a shared impression of the experience.

The Panel was initially charged with a broad task. One of the challenges for the coordinating team was how to enable the group to take ownership and refine its task. ICE, Caltrans, and the facilitator discussed at length which areas of the effort were constrained, and which were open to refinement. The Panel's constraints included a fixed timeframe, a stipulated context for the work, and a pre-determined set of participants. Within those constraints, the Panel was free to challenge or alter the broad task; decide on meeting logistics; further define the process; and, most importantly, specify the contents of its products.

During the first three meetings, the Panel members became acquainted, developed a mission

statement, discussed background and logistics, and began their work. To assist the meeting process, the facilitator proposed a set of ground rules that the Panel modified slightly. While the tenor and environment of the Panel's engagement was overall very positive and cooperative, even the development of ground rules and a mission statement were not "rubber stamp" activities, but the Panel did reach consensus and was able to move forward. As a result of these introductory activities, substantive work by the Panel did not really begin until the third and fourth meeting. The coordinating team worked to ensure that the Panel had enough time to accomplish its mission and stay focused on developing a product of maximum utility for MCAG.

As the Panel's work progressed, it became clear to the coordinating team that more meetings would be needed than the "up to six workshops" originally stipulated by the contract. Ultimately, the Panel met eight times, with one meeting conducted as a two-day session. Panel members expressed an interest and willingness to meet on a more regular basis, and for a full day wherever possible, in order to maintain momentum and to better provide MCAG with the input the agency needs to complete RTP environmental documents. This willingness to maintain the momentum and to schedule additional meetings reflected the interest in and high level of commitment to the effort by Panel members.

The participation of the EIR writer was important to the outcome of the Panel's efforts. He helped the Panel to reshape its outline through his practical feedback. His participation also gave the Panel the most direct way to shape the contents of the cumulative impacts analysis chapter of the EIR; he was able to apply several of the Panel's recommendations in his analysis.

The ultimate usefulness of the Panel's recommendations will be seen during the reviews of cumulative impacts analyses for the individual transportation projects in MCAG's RTP. The Panel members recognized this and expressed interest in follow-up at a later time.

Panel Reflections

As the Panel completed its work, members reflected on their experience participating in the effort. Their comments reflected what they learned about the attempt to address cumulative impacts at the plan level on a regional basis. They also gave feedback about the Panel process and experience. The reflections listed below are unedited comments from Panel members taken directly from meeting notes.

With respect to the Panel experience, Panel members provided the following feedback:

- Would have been beneficial to have more stakeholders in more resource areas in the room (participating and represented in process) such as cultural resources, air quality
- Would have been easier to have more defined and tangible task at beginning. At same time, it was also helpful for Panel's work not to be too circumscribed.
- Reflections on mission statement:
  - Mitigation language
    - Would be hard to do for Cumulative Impacts alone
    - Reads as if it is project specific

- Panel could not have completed its work until MCAG EIR is done; effectiveness of this approach to cumulative impacts analysis won't be known until after the documents are prepared and we see what the outcome is.
- Remove 3 words, "Mitigation responsibility for" (project specific), then Panel came very close to completing its mission
- Still to be done – fleshing out Outline concepts can be done once EIR is complete
- Need dialogue after EIR is complete.
- In future, distribute fleshed out Outline with Cumulative Impacts chapter of EIR
- Accomplishments
  - High degree of cooperation, low defensiveness
  - Participation consistent; high level of engagement
  - Happy with product – balanced needs with practical reality
  - Education – what needs to be considered in this process
  - No one left screaming
  - Covered a lot of material; tackled a big issue and new ground
  - Created an actual product
  - Product represents all voices in the room

Panel members offered the following comments about addressing cumulative impacts analysis:

- Need to look carefully at implications of early planning
  - What vulnerabilities does it induce?
  - What are the incentives and disincentives to participate?
- Make it easier for federal agencies to be involved in early planning
  - Provide legitimacy for the efforts of individuals
  - There's a need for a process to surface and address barriers to participation for federal agencies, including funding, blessing of the outcome, time commitments, and bad experiences
- Progress is incremental and sometimes you wind up in a different, yet still productive, place than you expected.
- Would be helpful for resource agencies to have GIS data that's usable, collected, integrated, credible, and in one location to house and maintain it
- With respect to GIS and data – include data for absence of occurrence of cultural and biological resources
- Expand scope of federal nexus; codify federal involvement in transportation planning process so process is streamlined
- Need protocols/guidelines for when analysis is enough

Additionally, Panel members provided the following inputto the PIP Steering Committee regarding the engagement of stakeholders in a plan-level effort:

- Create a direct link between agency benefit (FTE hours saved) and time invested. To degree possible, get actual numbers as plan moves forward. Create infrastructure to capture the numbers.

- Describe benefits to agencies up front
  - No surprises
  - Save $ and time
  - Relationship-building
  - Education
  - Facilitate implementation via involvement with a local face
  - Builds trust, understanding and perspective
  - Greater awareness of opportunities
- It's important who participates; possible criteria include:
  - Open outlook (some resistance is ok)
  - Proactive
  - Capacity to communicate (externally and internally)
  - Appropriate experience
  - Individual interest served by involvement (learning experience, belief in mission, personal relationships, etc.)
  - Desire to build trust, understanding and perspective
- Build in redundancy for team make-up – two people per agency if possible

Evaluation

In its closing session, Panel members provided feedback about what they thought worked and didn't work in the process. Their evaluation comments were:

- Positives
  - Having a series of conversations with agencies
  - Having a convenor and facilitator to keep us organized and moving
  - No physical violence ☺
  - Having real application to work with
  - Having the Caltrans staff who will be preparing the EIR join the Panel
  - Right people are here
  - Meeting location away from offices
  - Provided momentum for complementary efforts
- Could be changed
  - With spacing between meetings, hard to jump back in
  - Travel hard for whole day meetings
  - Making sure everyone with same baseline knowledge before first meeting

There were many benefits to the Panel effort. The forum of facilitated meetings with a small group of key agency representatives allowed meaningful and rich discussion of a number of historically difficult and divisive issues surrounding the analysis of cumulative impacts. New relationships between agency staff were forged and existing relationships were strengthened. Particularly noteworthy is that relationships were forged between staff from federal and regional government. Relationships among all the participating agencies were enhanced.

Panel members developed a clearer understanding of agency regulatory jurisdictions,

perspectives and practices regarding cumulative impacts analysis. They identified and discussed some of the inherent problems in conducting and meeting the goals of cumulative impacts analysis.

The Panel's work can be considered largely a success in terms of meeting project objectives and fulfilling the group's mission. The Cumulative Impacts Analysis Outline was applied to a great extent in the preparation of MCAG's EIR, resulting in a better Cumulative Impacts chapter with more analysis across alternatives than is typically included in environmental documents for RTPs. The Outline has universal application for other transportation planning agencies, councils of governments, and metropolitan planning organizations.

Participation in the Panel has broken down interagency barriers, challenged some traditional adversarial relationships, built trust, and increased exchange of ideas and data. MCAG received additional data from other participants that might otherwise not been identified or made available absent the Panel's effort. The experience also made clear the dynamic between a regional agency's data limitations and resource agencies' desire for more information. Mutual understanding of that dynamic was fostered through the Panel's discussions.

The effort was unprecedented with respect to its focus on arriving at an approach to analyzing cumulative impacts at a regional, plan level. Environmental and project delivery staff with agencies and organizations are accustomed to project-level cumulative impacts analysis. In this case, the Panel was required to think about cumulative impacts analysis in a very different way. Asking resource and regulatory agencies for input to regional impact analysis, rather than asking them to respond to project-level documents, has been a paradigm shift. Also, no statutory or regulatory process otherwise brings federal resource and regulatory agencies together with state agencies and a MPO to coordinate on environmental issues. This called for continual rethinking of the appropriate framework for analysis at a plan level. The Panel met that challenge.

Features

Regional Transportation Planning With a Difference: Expanded Environmental Analysis, Cumulative Impacts Analysis, GIS Growth Scenarios Modeling and Innovative Public Participation Energize Planning in Merced County, California

Brian J. Smith, Deputy Director, Planning and Modal Programs, and A1F02 member
brian_smith@dot.ca.gov
Sharon Scherzinger, Chief, Office of Regional and Interagency Planning
Katie Benouar, Senior Transportation Planner
Dara Wheeler, Associate Transportation Planner
California Department of Transportation

Reacting is easy. Meeting transportation challenges head-on and early requires collaboration, innovation, inspiration and determination. The Merced Partnership for Integrated Planning is an example of the transportation community reaching out to others to improve mobility while protecting and enhancing community values and natural resources.

Meeting transportation needs in a rapidly growing region is often frustrated by the introduction of environmental concerns late in the transportation planning and project delivery process. When unanticipated environmental issues surface during project delivery, delays occur and costs rise. The public is not well served by conflicts among federal and state resource and permitting agencies and state and local project sponsors.

Seeking ways to address this problem, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the US Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) signed an agreement in July 2000 to work together and commit resources to "support concerted, cooperative, effective and collaborative work among the three agencies in the transportation and environmental planning processes". One direct result of this agreement was the initiation of a specific environmental streamlining project.

Merced County in California's Central Valley was chosen as the site of the pilot project called the Partnership for Integrated Planning (PIP). The Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) is the regional agency and MPO responsible under state and federal law for transportation planning, programming and project delivery in this area.

The Challenge

Merced County is an agricultural community facing tremendous population growth and development pressures. Sitting on prime agricultural land and served by two major north-south highways -Interstate 5 and State Route 99- Merced County needs major transportation improvements to meet current demand and prepare for future growth in the region. Both corridors carry not only local travel and agricultural products; they are also major inter-regional, interstate and international travel and goods movement routes.

By 2030, Merced will double its population to over 417,000 people, and double its jobs base to 132,000. Currently Merced County's population is ethnically diverse, and has a high (15%) unemployment rate. Twenty-five percent of Merced County's employed population commutes outside the county to work.

For more information on the Partnership for Integrated Planning, go to: http://www.mcag.cog.ca.us/PIP/

The 10th campus of the prestigious University of California system has started construction on the outskirts of the City of Merced. The first research university to be constructed in the 21st century, it will include a planned community providing housing opportunities for students, faculty and support staff. Planning for the transportation needs of this new community will require a broad focus including - transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Merced County also possesses the rich biodiversity and sensitive habitats characteristic of California. Air quality has become a critical issue not only for transportation planning, but also for the agricultural industries that drive the region's economy. Protecting the natural environment is important, but so is creating jobs for the small communities in the county. These competing needs, and the uncoordinated land use decision-making that is typical in California, make regional transportation planning challenging.

The Merced PIP was launched in 2001 with the following goals:

- Formulate a model transportation planning approach incorporating environmental concerns in the 2004 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) update
- Conduct an in-depth environmental study (Environmental Impact Report pursuant to state law) for the RTP
- Streamline the project delivery process
- Use and evaluate GIS tools to model land use with transportation projects and environmental information
- Develop approach and methodology for assessing cumulative impacts of transportation projects in the RTP
- Lessen environmental impacts: avoid, minimize and mitigate
- Develop a progressive public education and involvement process

The centerpiece of PIP is the development of the RTP. The innovative RTP process is being used to explore the cumulative impacts analysis of transportation and land use decisions within the 26-year horizon of the plan. The scope is regional, at the plan level, rather than focusing on individual projects. The RTP process is sufficiently flexible to allow modifying transportation projects in the planning stage if significant cumulative impacts are identified. Later project level analysis can then refer back to and build upon regional analysis done in the RTP. In the RTP process it is possible to examine a group of projects with their collective impacts on endangered species and habitat, wetlands and prime farmlands.

Innovation Supporting Collaboration

Planning, funding, developing, operating and maintaining modern transportation systems requires the cooperation and collaboration of many organizations at all levels of government, and the explicit approval of the public. While it is easier for single stakeholders to unilaterally say NO, very few if any agencies can unilaterally say YES to approving and funding transportation system improvements.

The goal of collaborative planning is straightforward:

> Community needs for infrastructure and resource protection, conservation and enhancement are met by a progressive sequence of well-informed decisions at the local, regional and state levels.

Achieving that goal in today's ever-changing political, fiscal and environmental world is challenging.

MCAG was up to the challenge of embarking on a new way of doing the RTP due in 2004. MCAG is known for innovative planning, extensive public outreach to its cities and its many small agricultural communities. Its advanced GIS capabilities made it a good candidate for testing the integrated planning concept. MCAG already had GIS layers containing parcel level base maps, street and road configurations, soils information, wetland and cultural resource boundaries and hazardous materials sites. MCAG also had experience in multi-agency planning efforts and cultivating local support through efforts to establish a county half-cent sales tax and a development impact fee to fund transportation projects.

PIP has used the GIS-based UPLAN model for transportation and urban growth scenario analysis, mapping and graphic presentations to public meetings. A team from the University of California, Davis, consisting of Dr. Robert Johnston, Mike McCoy, and Stephanie Peck tailored UPLAN to support the Merced PIP. Users can change the assumed growth rates or other basic assumptions and can set various environmental and social attractors and constraints to growth such the built environment, sensitive habitat, or agricultural lands. Policy tests can be undertaken including changing the general plan, setting urban growth boundaries, preserving habitat and open space, and providing or denying transportation improvements. Infrastructure costs are being built into a future version of UPLAN. By graphically displaying future growth scenarios, MCAG staff can engage the public in spirited debate on the consequences of land use decisions and their vision of growth. The MCAG staff attributes much of the interest in PIP and the success of the public outreach to the use of the UPLAN maps.

Another innovative aspect of PIP is the early involvement of the resources and permitting agencies. The PIP Steering Committee that meets regularly includes Caltrans, FHWA, US EPA, UC Davis and MCAG. MCAG has also met with and received data from the regional offices of the California Department of Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service regarding habitat plans in the region. All the key agencies attended a stakeholders meeting in late October 2003 to hear about the status of PIP, the progress of the environmental study to date and the environmental assumptions being used. The federal and state permitting agencies will

have the opportunity to express their concerns regarding regional transportation impacts, to add any relevant data concerning resources, plans and programs they have for RTP consideration, and to provide input into the assumptions being used. Non-governmental stakeholder groups such as The Nature Conservancy have also participated.

To improve collaboration in preparing the environmental impact report for the RTP, Caltrans biologists, state and federal resource agency staff are working with Merced County to develop GIS environmental data layers for the EIR. The stakeholder agencies will have the opportunity for input as this data-gathering phase is being completed and prior to the development of plan alternatives. With this unprecedented look at transportation improvements in the planning stage, the resource agencies may be able to suggest habitat avoidance and mitigation strategies at the regional, corridor and landscape scale. The goal of the early input is to identify concerns in the planning stage when they can be addressed and to avoid later conflicts in the project development and construction phases. The timing of this input by the federal and state resources agencies is unusual. The PIP Steering Committee will evaluate the effectiveness of this approach and will seek to keep the stakeholders involved throughout the process.

Finally, a cumulative impacts team made up of MCAG, Caltrans, University of California Davis (UC Davis) and several resources agencies including US EPA, FHWA, NOAA Fisheries, State Office of Historic Preservation, US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish and Wildlife Service will produce a methodology for analyzing cumulative impacts in the Merced RTP.

Inspiration and Determination

Developing a vision is essential to establishing what community values must be protected and enhanced, and for evaluating the desirability of alternative future courses of action. A vision can inspire action to positively change the future and define ways the transportation system can support that change. Meeting from February though September 2003, the Merced community has developed its vision, transportation-related goals and problems, and possible solutions.

Supporting public participation has been a labor-intensive effort on the part of MCAG staff including Executive Director Jesse Brown, Deputy Executive Director Marjie Kirn, Candice Steelman and Rich Green. Over 800 county residents have been involved through workshops, telephone surveys or on-line questionnaires. Focus groups representing business/education, the Southeast Asian community, the Latino community, environmental and outdoor recreational interests, seniors, agriculture, commuters and youth provided additional forums and input. Over 32 meetings per quarter have been held. From this effort, the community approved the following vision themes for the transportation plan:

- Provide a good system of roads that are well maintained, safe, efficient and meet the transportation demands of people and freight
- Provide a transit system that is a viable choice
- Support full-time employment with livable wages, i.e. support job creation and economic vitality
- Preserve productive ag land and maintain or mitigate negative impacts to the environment
- Support orderly and planned growth that enhances the integration and connectivity of various modes of transportation
- Support clean air and water and avoid, minimize or mitigate negative impacts to the environment.

The member agencies of the Merced PIP Steering Committee have dedicated staff, time and funding to make PIP a reality. Despite state and federal budget problems, Suzanne Marr, Nova Blazej and Erin Foresman of US EPA, and Sue Kiser, Bill Haas, Brian Zewe and Stephanie Stoermer of FHWA have helped Caltrans keep the original partnership alive and played a key role in federal agency participation. This sort of commitment is the underpinning of the project. The Steering Committee hopes to share the UPLAN tool and the techniques for public involvement and agency involvement with others in the transportation community. Now more than halfway through, one early lesson learned is that commitment of the partners to put in time and resources is critical. The partners must embrace the goal of a better-integrated planning process and be willing to modify the way they do business to arrive there. The agencies involved must be able to carry out their specific missions while at the same time serving the needs of the community. So far, participants are maintaining their enthusiasm and optimism that this process represents an improvement over business as usual and they are making the commitment.

Perhaps most importantly, this project has continued to receive the support of local elected officials. This is critical since it is these local officials who must make future land use decisions, and who sit on the board of the regional transportation agency deciding which future projects and services to pursue.

That commitment will be needed in January 2004 as the project moves to examining RTP scenarios representing various proposed alternatives for transportation development over the next 26 years. Through another round of public participation workshops and meetings with the governing bodies of all the cities in the county as well as the County Board of Supervisors and the MCAG Board of Directors, the preferred alternative will be selected in March 2004. The RTP will then be finalized and published in the summer of 2004. Upon completion of the project, the Steering committee, community participants and focus groups will all be asked to evaluate the process. MCAG, Caltrans, US EPA, UC Davis and FHWA will use the evaluation to develop lessons learned and best practices to be shared for

replicating the successful elements of PIP in other regions of California.

Despite severe funding shortfalls of over the last several years, Caltrans, FHWA and US EPA have been able to meet their commitments in supporting the enhanced planning and public outreach activities at the heart of the PIP because of the perceived benefits not only to Merced, but as a model for export to other regions.

I-69 TCC

By RICHARD GOLDSMITH
Environmental Affairs Division
RGOLDSMI@dot.state.tx.us
Texas Department of Transportation

In 2002 Texas Gov. Rick Perry challenged TxDOT to create during the next half century a transportation project that will rival the interstate highway system. Perry's vision is to build super corridors with:

- Three passenger lanes in each direction
- Two truck lanes in each direction
- Three rail lines (high-speed passenger, commuter, freight) in each direction
- A 200-foot-wide easement for utilities, such as fiber optic cable, pipelines for water and petrochemicals.

Dubbed the Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC), the system will not pass directly through major urban areas. Instead, TTC is meant to divert through traffic away from developed areas, thus speeding cross-country travel, while easing congestion and cutting pollution from vehicle emissions in urban areas.

Gov. Perry signed legislation in June 2003 giving TxDOT the authority to proceed with development of the Trans-Texas Corridor. Texas' 1,000 miles of I-69, with 13 to 15 Segments of Independent Utility (SIUs), now will include design elements of TTC. I-69 is one of the original 21 Congressional High Priority Corridors in ISTEA (1991) and also was chosen in 2002 as a streamlining pilot project under TEA-21, Section 1309.

TxDOT has been formulating a strategy that would allow I-69 to progress while integrating the proposed TTC cross-section that adds rail and utility components. A single, contiguous corridor incorporating the Governor's vision (TTC) and I-69 is preferable, but will be one of several corridor alternatives examined. Cost, engineering, or environmental implications may dictate that I-69 and other modes must proceed in separate corridors.

To build 4,000 miles of multi-purpose transportation corridors each up to 1,200 feet wide, TxDOT quickly realized that a priority would need to be placed on identifying and preserving up to 900 square miles of right of way, or more area than the state of Rhode Island.

The overall goal is to develop an environmentally sound, publicly supported Trans-Texas Corridor that can be built in a timely manner. Avoidance and minimization of adverse environmental impacts is paramount.

- Concepts to accomplish that end include:
- A tiered NEPA approach.
- Streamlining the environmental process.
- Internal training on streamlining strategies.
- Instead of the piece-meal mitigation efforts of the past, a broad ecosystem approach to mitigation to compensate for unavoidable impacts. (See related story on TERS, Texas Environmental Resource Stewards.)
- The use of mitigation banks.
- Within areas that do not meet standards for air quality, federal transportation conformity requirements affecting transportation apply. Texas has 16 non-attainment counties and 25 that could be listed under new standards. Where possible, TTC will be designed to avoid the 16 non-attainment and 25 near non-attainment counties so that local conformity plans in these counties will not need to be adapted to include TTC.
- Transportation corridor preservation to minimize impacts and costs that would otherwise result from development encroaching upon desirable routes.
- Early cooperation and collaboration with resource agencies to set mitigation policy to foster resource agency buy-in early in the process.
- Reducing field surveys by using technology such as GIS tools to identify priority resources.

With FHWA concurrence, TxDOT concluded that a tiered environmental process would allow continuous project progression. The Tier 1 process would use the QUANTM and the EPA's Region 6 Geographical Information Systems Screening Tool (GISST) processes to determine where rail and utilities can remain contiguous to the vehicle highway lanes. This will produce a smaller study area and allow early corridor preservation for the rail/utility component while the vehicle component continues to the Tier 2 environmental process with its detailed location studies.

QUANTM is a GIS planning tool that generates planning alignments that satisfy defined constraints. GISST is an environmental assessment tool that takes a systematic approach to cumulative and multiple environmental impacts.

As proposed, the Tier 1 environmental process will use Stages 1 and 2 work scopes. Stage 1 will include data collection, study area development, TTC/I-69 purpose and need development, and public involvement. Stage 2 will include the TTC/I-69 corridor alternatives development and analysis, selecting preferred corridors, and the Tier 1 EIS and ROD. TxDOT anticipates that the Tier 1 process can be completed in 12 to 18 months. The Tier 1 ROD would support a location decision only. After the Tier 1 process, the TTC/I-69 freeway component would proceed to Tier 2, which includes Stages 3 and 4 and the deferred Stage 1 and 2 tasks. The Tier 2 process would

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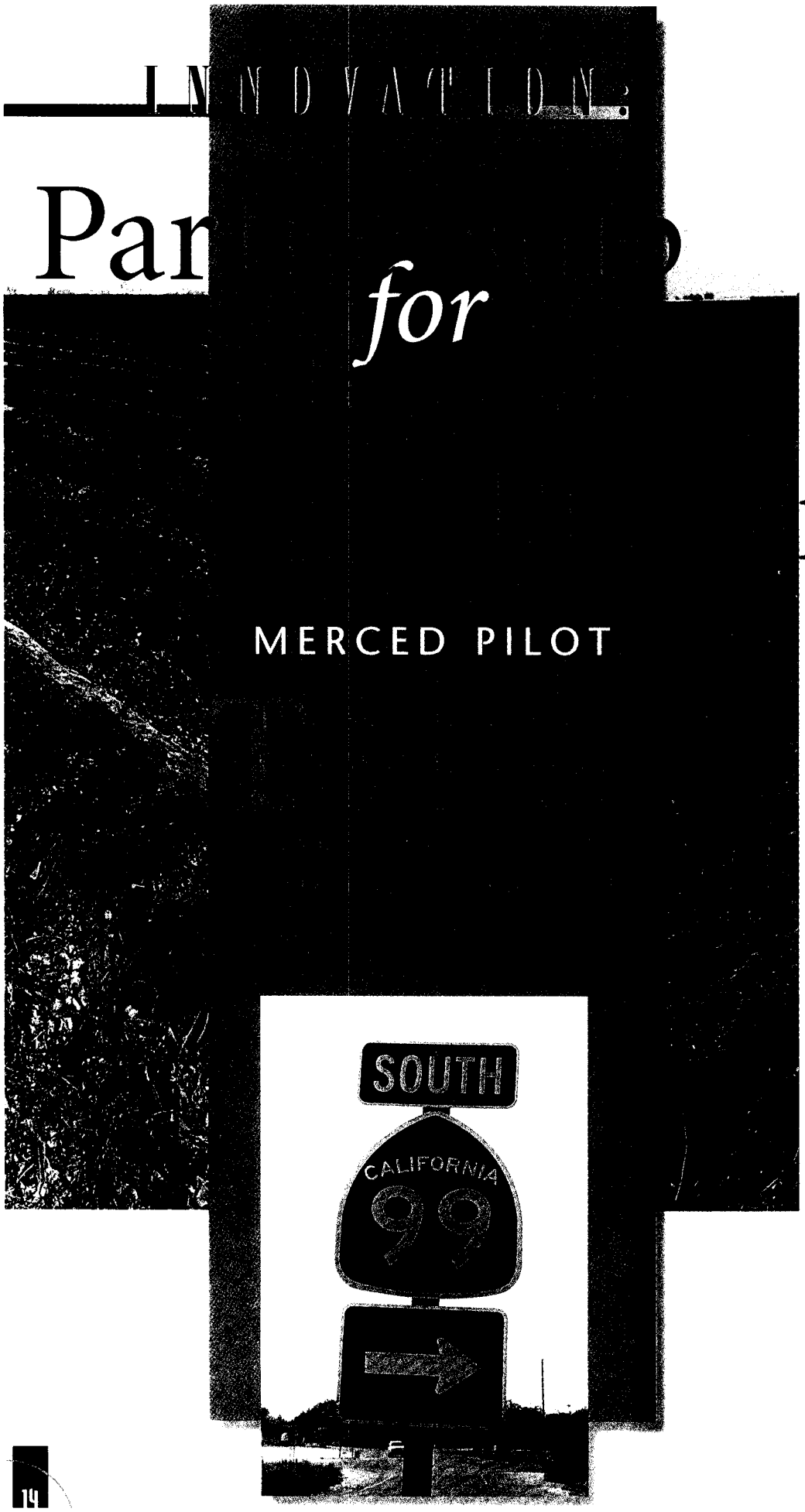
INNOVATION

Par for ing

MERCED PILOT



Nothing illustrates this better than the attempt to develop a new campus of the University of California to the east of the city of Merced. The effort started in the early 1990s, when the Virginia Smith Trust offered several thousand acres of land on which to locate a new university campus. In the foothills of the Sierra, the largely unused grasslands seemed ideal. The Smith trust was offering scholarships to Merced area high school seniors so they could stay near their home town for higher education. The property was some distance to the east of Merced; its surrounding area offered a new locus for development that would not result in converting more valuable farmland for houses and streets. There was enormous local support for the university campus.

Eagerly, the local agencies got together to plan for a valuable new institution in Merced County.

But in the mid-1990s, the campus proposal stumbled. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Agency declared several species of fairy shrimp, which were abundant in vernal pools, an endangered species. And on the Smith property was an array of vernal pools that biologists judged to be among the richest in California. The Environmental Protection Agency and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Agency could not provide approvals

to allow the campus to go forward. Ultimately, the campus had to be moved to an already-developed golf course near valuable farmland, engendering inevitable pressures for additional development and a reduction in California's stock of farmland.

And because the access highway to the university crossed several jurisdictions, three separate agencies began preparing three separate environmental documents to get it approved. Caltrans began work on a Negative Declaration to clear the Mission Interchange with Route 99; the county is doing an Environmental Impact Statement on the portion in Merced County, and the University of California is writing an environmental document for the portion on its campus.

Jesse Brown, of the Merced County Association of Governments, and Bill Nicholson, Director of the Merced County Planning and Community Development Department, in later discussions, felt that there had to be a better solution. Local and regional and planning had been extensive. But they had not had an adequate understanding of the requirements of the state and federal permitting agencies.

Elsewhere, Caltrans and the permitting agencies were running into similar problems. They were arriving at project development stages only to find that they had not identified potential problems in the permitting process. Caltrans needed to understand the missions and needs of the permitting agencies as well as potential future changes that could bring projects to a halt. The Mare Island Accord, an agreement between Caltrans and the permitting agencies that was signed in 1999, contained several provisions to improve communication, quality and timeliness, and to address environmental issues early in transportation planning through frequent communications, cross training and rotational assignments between the agencies.

Merced County, Caltrans and a number of resource agencies are working together to reduce the possibility of trial-and-error planning.

And Caltrans, Jesse Brown and Bill Nicholson decided to move quickly to try to make the process work better for Merced County. They developed the Partnership for Integrated Planning, a pilot project. Directed by representatives of the founding agencies, it has assembled representatives of federal, state and local agencies and other interested parties to bring differing perspectives to bear on problems early.

The two-year project will assemble and integrate data within the context of the Merced Council of Governments' 20-year Regional Transportation Plan. The data may also be used in the Merced County General Plan framework. Data will be modeled and displayed in several scenarios for participants to evaluate and develop plan-level recommendations on optimal locations for development and transportation infrastructure.

Participants will evaluate the effort and recommend ways to identify environmental issues before the project development process starts. The intent is for the lessons learned and the methodologies developed to be used as a model throughout California and showcased nationwide.

Participants and environmental resource agencies will address environmental impacts and mitigation for land development and transportation projects. An outcome of this effort should be strengthened cumulative impact analysis at the plan stage and improved identification of sensitive environmental resources early in the planning process. This information can then be used to guide planning decisions on the most appropriate locations for land use development and transportation infrastructure.

Merced County is located in the San Joaquin Valley east of the San Francisco Bay area. Primarily a rural county with the city of Merced its only urbanized area, it contains rich agricultural lands and environmental areas that are being crowded by changing land uses. The county is also a gateway to recreational opportunities at Yosemite and other Sierra destinations. Interregional travel and resulting problems derive from sources outside the county. Air quality is a major issue in the entire eight-county San Joaquin Valley air basin, which does not meet federal air quality standards.

INNOVATION:

Partnership *for* Integrated Planning

MERCED PILOT

The Merced County Association of Governments, the federally recognized metropolitan planning organization for transportation planning, was selected as a partner for several reasons, including its understanding of the pitfalls of a lack of communication. The agency was known for innovative planning efforts and possessed a working geographic information system that contained parcel-level base maps, street and road configurations, soils information, wetland and cultural limits and hazardous materials sites, all the stuff of avoidance.

In addition, development of the agency's new regional transportation plan was just starting, and large development projects had been proposed that would impact environmentally sensitive areas. The EPA, Caltrans and FHWA, all actively involved in the region, were able to channel resources to the partnership.

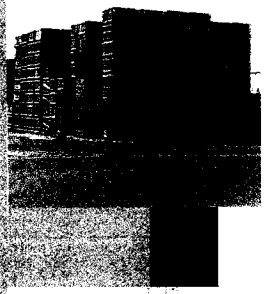
Merced County needed the partnership for a number of reasons. State Route 99, its main north-south route, and State Route 152, its main east-west route, were being overwhelmed by new commuters who were escaping higher real estate prices outside the county. Both routes carried high levels of interregional travel from outside the county, particularly truck travel. And both routes were in need of substantial upgrades.

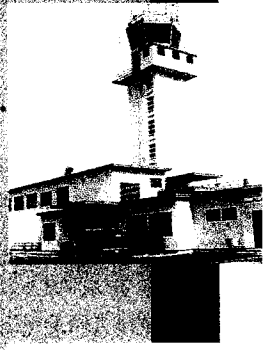
Elsewhere, new towns were being proposed at Santa Nella, Villages of Laguna San Luis, Fox Hills and Yosemite Lakes Estates. Castle Air Force Base had been retired by the U. S. Air Force and new uses for the base were being explored. And, as with most of the rest of the San Joaquin Valley, population pressures were threatening both the sensitive wetlands of the south and western portions of the county and valuable farmland elsewhere. If the county were to develop the infrastructure necessary to serve the growth while minimizing impacts to these valuable resources, it would have to have a strong working relationship with all the agencies whose missions involved their protection. The local agencies signed on.

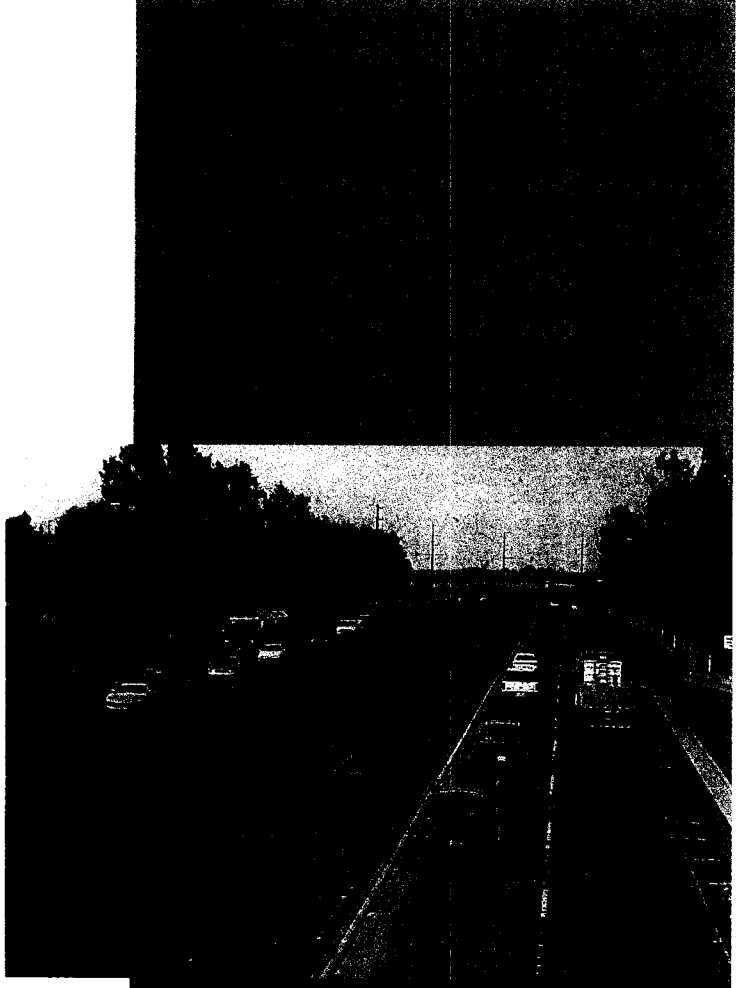
The partnership has been in place since mid-2001. Among its first tasks was an effort to create among the members of the partnership an understanding of their various missions. This

If the partnership is successful, it will result in:

1. *Preservation of natural resources*
2. *Cleaner water and air*
3. *Efficient use of public funds*
4. *Better planning tools for long-range planning*
5. *A forum to implement 1999 California Regional Transportation Plan Guidelines*
6. *Resolution of issues in the planning process, before project development begins*
7. *Early "buyoff" from regulatory agencies on approach to projects*
8. *Quicker project delivery*
9. *Stronger consideration by local agencies of environmental goals*
10. *Rules of engagement and tools to resolve issues that can be applied statewide*
11. *Ultimately, a more efficient intermodal transportation system*







Busy State Route 99 is in for a number of improvements in coming years; early integration of planning is bound to make that easier.

would be necessary as a basis for principled negotiation later on. Over the life of the project, the participants will gather planning and environmental information for inclusion in the GIS, identify and rank strategic issues, integrate transportation, environmental and land use strategies and model them and, ultimately, develop and distribute project recommendations.

"Nobody is assuming this is going to be easy," Brown says. "These agencies have missions that are often at cross purposes. But we must get them involved in the planning process. We will have to struggle with major issues, but ultimately, the better we know each other, the better our chances of a successful future for Merced County."

— *Gene Berthelsen*

Governor Davis Spearhead Transportation Renaissance

By Maria Contreras Sweet

Secretary, Business, Transportation and Housing Agency

As we begin a new year I want to thank the employees of Caltrans for your dedicated service in 2001. With your help, we made a record investment in improving California's transportation infrastructure. Nearly $6 billion worth of transportation improvements projects are currently underway–many of them at an accelerated rate.

Over the next year, California will have over $6 billion in transportation projects alone under construction, the largest in state history. California's transportation budget is now twice the size of that of any other state.

The goal of the Davis administration is to enhance the safe, efficient and reliable movement of people and goods. We have set out to do something about gridlock, so that people can travel to and from work more quickly and spend more time with their families or do whatever activity they enjoy in this great state.

The state has identified $200 million in transportation projects that will be delivered at accelerated speed, providing a quick kick-start to the economy. Many projects are being brought on line a year or more in advance of their original construction dates.

We've formed a unique and effective partnership with Caltrans, the Resources Agency and Cal-EPA to expedite the approval process for transportation construction. Governor Davis, Director Morales and I will be looking for additional ways to speed these projects. Foremost, we will reach out to our partners in local and regional governments to support that goal, and we will do it in an environmentally friendly way.

So, on behalf of Governor Davis, thanks again for all that you do. Here's wishing each of you a happy New Year.

MCAG Quarter 1, 2003 Questionnaire: Vision of Merced County

Answers to the question, "If Merced County were a person, who would that person be and why?"

- Rodney Dangerfield because we get no respect
- Andy Griffith because he has small town family values, sincerity
- Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath. She's poor and uneducated, but despite her problems, her spirit can never be broken.
- A young, energetic person with no clear goals.
- Jerry Falwell. His political attitudes espouse crippling conservative philosophies, all but choking any moderate views from getting a voice.
- An aging person with bumps and aches, without the medical plan to make it better.
- On a bad day: a bag lady. On a good day: John Muir.
- An overblown politician
- A child with a lot of potential growing up In a very conservative family.
- Jerry O'Banion (County Board of Supervisors) – honest and helpful
- Robin Williams. Merced can have fun and be serious, too.
- Scarlett O'Hara, shaking her fist at the State and Federal government and saying, "We will never be poor again!"
- Jimmy Buffett because he's old, family-oriented, happy-go-lucky and plays country folk music.