

The New Collaborative Region: Suburbs and Cities Working on the Future

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Panel Presentation:

Transportation, Land Use and Regional Collaboration:

California Experiences

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I am Jesse Brown, and I am with the Merced County Association of Governments. MCAG is a council of governments and a metropolitan planning organization. Its primary responsibility is to develop transportation plans and try and find the dollars to make those plans happen.

MCAG also has taken some of those other little steps that were mentioned earlier about doing other things, and it does the unsightly thing of maintaining and providing the solid waste service for the County of Merced as well as it is the transit service provider for all of Merced County. So it has its tentacles in some of those other things that go across lines.

In 2001, the Federal Highway Administration, Caltrans, and U.S. EPA were looking for a guinea pig to examine an updated way of doing regional transportation planning. And their goals were three- or fourfold. They wanted to involve some of the state and federal permitting agencies and environmental agencies earlier in the process. They wanted to have an enhanced public participation process to get people involved earlier and more often in the process. They wanted to look at the new kinds of land use modeling tools that were available, and be able to utilize those in the transportation planning process so that maybe we could do a little bit better job of integrating land use and transportation.

So what I'd like to do is talk about five or six different subject areas here. First of all, just to simply give you a little bit of background about the Merced area. Many of you may know where the central part of California is, but I won't take that for granted. I am going to talk a little bit about the model that we use, the public participation model that we developed, the results, and what's next for the Central Valley.

There's that blow-out. There's Merced. If you take a map of California and fold it in half and fold it in half again, you are going to hit Merced. Merced is about 1,700 square miles. It's only got about 230,000 folks in it right now, but it's growing like crazy.

We have six communities, six incorporated towns. On the right-hand side, you see Highway 99. That is the backbone of the Central Valley. Merced is a community of about 70,000. We have Atwater at about 25,000. And on the west side of the county, you see Interstate 5 going on a north/south route there. And the city of Los Banos is

a town of about 30,000 that's undergoing significant growth pressure from the South Bay area.

A very unsophisticated slide, but it tells a story. We are growing like crazy. The bottom half of that slide is employment. The top half is population.

You will notice that we are growing more population than we are jobs. And one of the reasons is that we still have, to some extent, some affordable housing in Merced County, and so we're seeing a lot of people that are moving there and having jobs elsewhere. So we have a major commute problem in all -- well, in three different directions -- north towards Modesto/Stockton, south towards Fresno and west towards the South Bay area.

That's a really nice slide that shows where our employment is. We do have a large agricultural sector that is the major base employment in Merced County. Other than that, we have a large government sector with education and a prison. And other than that, we are seeing a lot of other new development happening. Certainly with UC Merced opening last fall, we are going to see a lot more happening in Merced, and we are very pleased with that.

From an ethnicity point of view, we are a minority-majority county. We have a large Hispanic/Latino contingent.

We have a large Southeast Asian contingent. And that makes for a lot of challenges in communication. The model that we used for looking at and evaluating land use and the impacts of our transportation system on the land use system was something called U Plan. It was developed by UC Davis. It's a pretty simple model to be able to use, but it's a very labor and data-intensive model to use, as are all geographic information systems.

We were able to use it to develop scenarios, evaluate those scenarios. And certainly graphically it's a place where you can start conversations and engage the public in talking about what the issues are.

Again, just using your basic geographic information system, there are as many data layers as you can possibly get involved. They deal with the transportation and infrastructure systems. They can deal with your natural geologic and geographic systems, your institutional systems, who owns the land, and dealing with the important environmental layers, whether it's wetlands, agricultural lands, and things of that nature.

We had to get that information from all these various sources. We had to engage those folks and get them involved and have them provide us that data. So we built that relationship. And we were endeavoring to maintain that.

And here's a map of Merced County, with the green areas showing that which is under various kinds of agricultural usage. And the only thing that's particularly not in agricultural usage is the lighter colors, and those are probably more in grazing lands than anything else. So pretty much all of it is being used for one agricultural type or another.

One of the layers that we developed by overlaying all of the important environmental data was this environmentally sensitive area. And so you can see that if it's not in

agriculture, folks that had concerns about habitat said that the foothill areas that are on the east and the foothill areas on the west are certainly important environmental areas. The lines that are going across the map on a horizontal basis are typically streams and rivers, so those are riparian areas that are also extremely important.

When we got through, we had evaluated where we had general plans that were already proposing development, looked at areas that needed to be preserved for agriculture and habitat protection, and targeted some of the areas there in the darker colors for urban development. And that became our framework for evaluating the later transportation systems.

Another major element -- and it's a theme that you have heard, or at least I have heard throughout the presentations this morning -- is the need for engaging the public, and engaging the public in a meaningful and true way, not simply going out and doing your plan and then coming back and saying, "Here it is. Take it or leave it," and taking public comment and assuming that that's going to solve the problem. We found out that that's archaic. It doesn't work. It doesn't get you where you need to be, and it's not long-lasting. So we thought we went the extra mile.

Our governing board, that purple box up there, is the group of elected officials that make the policy decisions. And in my county, that happens to be all five county supervisors and a mayor/councilperson from each of the six cities. They make the decisions.

The area in blue is our normal policy development and approval process. That includes a citizens committee. It includes our planning staffs from the cities and the county, and it includes our city managers and county executive officer.

What we added to that was a beefed-up set of meetings that were in the green and, also, all of those that go -- all those committees and target groups in the tan. We basically looked at environmental justice kinds of issues, and said, "Who are the groups that typically are not part of this process? Who are the groups that, when you have that meeting on Thursday evening, don't show up?"

And so we went out and interviewed leaders from each of those communities. We asked, "Who needs to be involved from your community? How should they be involved? When is the best time to be involved?"

And how can we get you to be part of our process?" And that certainly included food from time to time.

So we engaged those groups. We specifically identified people within each of those groups that we worked with throughout this entire process. So that addressed some of the EJ issues.

The other issues that are out there simply are those of geography. Typically, we would go out and work with the cities, their city planning departments, the city planning commissions. But we also, in Merced County, have unincorporated communities. And oftentimes they were left out. Some of our unincorporated communities are as large as some of our smaller cities. So you can't ignore those folks, and you need to engage them. So we did.

Over the space of two years, as we developed this process -- I am going to skip past this for a second. These were the steps that we developed when we went through our planning process. We didn't start out with the plan. We started out with asking them, "What is the vision? What is your vision of your community? What is the vision of the county from your perspective? From that, what are your goals? What are the scenarios? How would you like to see your area? What is the mixture of land use? How do you see agriculture in the future?"

And then we asked them some very fundamental questions about funding, whether or not they would engage additional dollars for transportation projects, et cetera, went through scenarios, scenario selection, and plan approval. In doing those scenarios, we again came up with -- we didn't do A, B, C, and D, but we did do capacity, transit, hybrid, or no build, and then we would characterize those by the various modes that you might have so that they were recognizable by the folks that went out there.

And each time that we had one of these opportunities, we went out and talked with the public again. So for each of those interest groups and for each of those geographies, basically every quarter we held anywhere between 30 and 45 public meetings that could have ranged from five people to 25 people. It's a very staff- and labor-intensive situation.

We talked about the funding options. We told them that, "Here's what you're going to have if we don't increase funding." So we talked about a new development fee, we talked about a transportation sales tax, additional gas tax, a regional license increase fee for maintenance districts, and we literally handed out pieces of paper and had them vote on whether or not they thought that was a good idea. It wasn't just telling them. It was asking them.

After we asked them about the scenarios and asked them about the costs, we came back and said, "Under each one of these scenarios, this is what you can get." And we asked them again what they thought. We came back after that and said, "Instead of waiting until the end and then doing the environmental impact report" -- I mean, because we had that GIS model -- we were able to tell them by each of the scenarios that we came up with, "Here's the amount of impact that is going to happen on ag land. And we again asked them what they thought.

So when we got done, we had a plan that had widespread support. We were able to get our regional transportation plan adopted with ease. We were able to, after three years of trying, get a countywide transportation impact fee approved. One of maybe a handful in California where you have the fees being collected by each of the cities and the county and then transmitted to the Council of Governments for a priority list of 10 projects that we selected as a region, not individually.

We were able to demonstrate that we had support for a transportation measure, a sales tax dedicated for transportation. In 2002, we tried to get one passed. Unfortunately, we only got 62 percent of the vote and, of course, here in California you needed two-thirds. So we went back out and redeveloped that plan. That was unanimously adopted by all of our city councils and Board of Supervisors in the month of December. And this June, we are going to go back out and hopefully get something called Measure A approved.

Our survey information that was done last August showed that we had about a 75 percent support level across the county. And I will tell you that I think the lion's share of that support level is a result of the process that we went through to develop the Regional Transportation Plan and the education program that we did to make people understand what their trade-offs were.

And I will tell you right now that part of the lesson that I learned was from Riverside County, where you have done such a magnificent job of developing a new general plan, a Regional Transportation Plan, and making people understand how they all fit together. So I appreciate that lesson.

What's next? Well, Doug mentioned a little bit of that. In June, Caltrans, with the blessing of Secretary Sunne Wright McPeak, put out a proposal or requested proposals from all of the MPOs across the state to propose a blueprint planning process that would allow each of the MPOs or any combination of MPOs to submit a proposal for this plan to better integrate land use environment and transportation.

In the San Joaquin Valley, there are eight MPOs that start in Bakersfield and going north all the way to Stockton. We decided that we would put in a joint application. And that joint application was approved. What we are going to be attempting to do is look at and integrate our transportation, housing, supporting infrastructure, air quality, habitat, everything that you ought to be doing to do something on a regional basis. It will be nothing short of herding cats to be able to make this all happen, but we have some good partners. The Great Valley Center and the San Joaquin Valley Air District are some of those partners. And we will certainly be attempting to engage other major stakeholders in this process from the get-go.

One of the first things that we are going to be doing is having a joint training exercise with all of the transportation planning agencies at the UC Merced campus, getting everybody to develop that institutional framework that asks, "How do we engage the folks that need to be at the table as the first step in this process?" We are not concerned at this point about the model. We are not concerned at this point about the traffic model. What we are concerned about is how we get everybody engaged and get them as part of the process and make people understand that we need to have a grass roots process here.

Last Friday, I was in Modesto -- this is at the Great Valley Center -- and Sunne Wright McPeak handed me a check for \$2 million to start this process. That's supposed to last for a year, and then we are hopefully going to get another installment of that probably sometime this fall.

I hope that I will be able to be invited back in a year or two to let you know of our progress. And hopefully we'll be successful. Thank you so much.