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Grant to help roadways expand with Valley growth

By Adam Ashton
THE MODESTO BEE

San Joaquin Valley transportation planners won a \$2 million cut Friday from a new fund aimed at bringing roads up to speed with the state's growing population.

In return, Sacramento expects leaders from eight valley counties to draft a comprehensive regional transportation plan over the next two years.

"Suddenly, this region is getting its fair share," said Carol Whiteside, a former Modesto mayor and president of the Great Valley Center.

She announced the grant at a Modesto meeting with valley transportation planners, state Transportation Secretary Sunne Wright McPeak, and Labor and Workforce Development Agency Secretary Victoria Bradshaw.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District agreed to chip in an extra \$500,000.

"We think it's a step in the right direction of solving problems the whole valley faces," said Jaime Holt, air district spokeswoman.

Jesse Brown, director of the Merced County Association of Governments, said the project will require another \$2 million to finish next year.

He said the county groups will conduct projects in their areas and then come together to draft some findings that could guide local government planning across the valley. His group is the project's lead agency.

"It's a real opportunity for everyone in the valley," he said.

The valley's funding represents 40 percent of the state's Regional Blueprint Planning grants, a \$5 million program unveiled in last year's budget.

The remaining \$3 million will go to six other transportation groups in the Bay Area, Southern California, Central Coast and Sacramento Valley.

McPeak said the state chose to give the greatest portion to the San Joaquin proposal because of the unity the eight counties showed in drafting their request and the region's rapid growth.

"We must be stewards of (the valley's) assets or we will lose the opportunities the San Joaquin Valley represents," said McPeak, who grew up on a Livingston farm.

She said the plan could provide background for local governments when they discuss how to balance agriculture, the environment, new subdivisions and transportation.

"Without looking at it from a regional perspective, it really is tunnel vision," said Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey, chairwoman of Brown's group.

McPeak said the project could save the smaller agencies time and money by taking the place of individual studies on growth impacts.

"It's built on the notion that we want to cooperate in how we are using our land," she said.

State estimates released by the Great Valley Center indicate traffic congestion increased by 52 percent in the Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Merced and Madera counties since 1998, and by 577 percent in the Southern Joaquin Valley beginning in Fresno County.

Some of the eight valley counties are pursuing their own projects to get a better handle on traffic congestion.

Stanislaus County voters are expected to vote in November on a half-cent sales tax increase that could raise up to \$1.02 billion for road projects over the next 30 years. Merced County voters will decide a similar measure in June.

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