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HOME

NEWS
 News Archive
 City/County
 Nation/World
 Crime & Courts
 Police Calls

SPORTS

LIFESTYLES

OBITUARIES

BUSINESS

OPINION

CLASSIFIEDS
 Jobs
 Homes
 Autos

County wants a 'blueprint' to meet growth

Officials, administrators hope new plan will make transition easier for Central Valley as new residents pour in

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More and more people are moving to Central California and projections indicate that it's not going to change any time soon.

The City Council listened to a presentation by the Merced County Association of Governments last week about efforts to form a regional plan for handling growth in the San Joaquin Valley.

"We need to keep in mind that this area is growing. The valley will grow in population by 139 percent by 2050, which, to put it into perspective, is the equivalent of 10 new Fresnoes or how the Bay Area looks today," said Candice Steelman, MCAG's public affairs manager.

Stelman said the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley decided a regional plan was needed to deal with the expected growth.

The plan, called the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint, will establish goals in the area of economic development, land use patterns, transportation infrastructure and environmental planning. MCAG was given a planning grant by Caltrans on behalf of eight Valley regional agencies participating in forming the blueprint.

The process of planning the blueprint is expected to take 18 months and will begin tomorrow at the Fresno Convention Center where the valley's councils of governments will host speakers addressing issues from agriculture to education. As the process continues there will be many public workshops and information updates given on the blueprint's progress.

Stelman said the blueprint will be designed to be built from the bottom up, starting with local city councils and boards of supervisors giving input. She said the general public, environmentalists, education groups and other interested parties will also participate.

In a telephone interview, Merced County Supervisor Jerry O'Banion said the Valley needs a common plan.

"I think it can be beneficial," O'Banion said. "The Central Valley will not be recognized unless it speaks with one voice."

He said he also hopes the blueprint does not trump county or city general plans when it is completed.

Mayor Michael Amabile expressed the same concern.

"Yes, many problems throughout the eight counties are very similar. I'm in favor of the blueprint, I just want to continue to maintain local control," Amabile said. "I've seen things come down from the state before where there are penalties if you grow any other way."

Steelman said the blueprint is not designed to dictate the most minute detail.

"The blueprint is not meant to be a regional planning agency that is suddenly going to come down with overriding plans for the Valley down to the parcel that everyone has to follow," she said. "It is simply for us all to get together and come up with a common vision. What the nature of that vision is going to be has yet to be decided."

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