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Valley must change its ways or be smoggier version of L.A.

By Bill McEwen / The Fresno Bee
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Keith Bergthold had the floor last week at the Fresno County Board of Supervisors meeting, and he was on a roll.

The No. 2 guy in the city of Fresno's planning and development department was talking about seismic changes in the global economy and our place in it, cleaning the air, housing densities and creating a multicounty transportation loop to move people quickly and efficiently.

"Now is the time," Bergthold said. "We're the folks. If we don't use this opportunity, we'll lose it. Nobody else is going to help us.

"Everything about the future is going to be different than the past."

Bergthold gets it. If Fresno and neighboring counties in the San Joaquin Valley don't get their act together soon, our region will metastasize into a poorer, smoggier version of Los Angeles.

Others get it, too, and some of them are involved in the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint, which is attempting to plan land use and transportation in eight counties through 2050. Organizers made a presentation to Fresno County supervisors last week.

Among them: Fresno builder Kevin Castanos, who is co-chairman of the Metro Rural Loop committee with retired businessman James Hallowell. Said Castanos of the Valley Blueprint and the proposed loop, "This is the most important and most noble work of our careers."

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The question is, whether elected officials will take the blueprint to heart, or keep approving projects willy-nilly, relying on campaign donations and the mantra of job creation as their guide.

Based on the reaction of the supervisors last week, it appears that some of them get it.

"When it comes to land use, the status quo is not an option," said Susan Anderson, adding that permanent protections for agricultural land must be enacted.

Henry Perea advocated for farmland preservation, too, and Judy Case -- who is also a member of the California Air Resources Board -- talked about slowing growth and getting serious about air-pollution cleanup: "We're starting to choke on our exhaust."

But Bob Waterston and Phil Larson sounded wedded to the past. Waterston, once again, raised the possibility of the county using retail development such as an outlet center along Interstate 5 to add sales tax revenue to its general fund. Larson talked more about fixing roads than about finding better ways of moving and housing people, preserving open space and reducing asthma rates.

The supervisors' attitudes reflect reality in the Valley. Some people haven't figured out that planning ahead saves money, makes life easier and supports economic success. Or that part of the reason the roads are bad and the potholes aren't filled is we let people build whatever they want wherever they want, thus strapping taxpayer resources.

Other people simply are frightened by change and believe that mass transit such as light rail will bankrupt us and that building up instead of out will destroy the Valley as we know it.

Then there are those who realize how much gas will cost in 20 years, how important agriculture is to the Valley's economy and how nice it would be to preserve green space while we grow.

If the ambitious Valley Blueprint is to become a working document, its promoters must use a two-pronged approach to win people over.

One picture should be of futuristic (and sensible) transportation corridors mixing rail, light-rail, freeways and bike paths connecting people to high-paying jobs, shopping and recreation from nearby population centers.

Other pictures should be of people stuck endlessly in traffic on pothole-riddled roads and freeways trying to get somewhere from rural ranchettes that may -- or may not -- have sufficient water. And of cities bumping into one another, subdivisions gobbling up what used to be prime farmland and people working for minimum wage.

While only a relative handful of people might recognize the value of good planning and modern transportation technologies, everyone hates a long, bumpy commute to a job that barely pays the rent.

The columnist can be reached at bmcewen@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6632. Check out his blog at fresnobeehive.com.

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