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City, county leaders discuss regional planning solutions

By Garth Stapley
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FRESNO -- City and county politicians putting aside selfish interests for the good of a region really is possible, such leaders in the San Joaquin Valley heard Friday at a landmark conference.

Some bristled at the idea of giving up traditional control over growth patterns to give the valley a fighting chance at curbing climate-changing carbon emissions.

But many leaders of several dozen cities and eight counties gathered at the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Executive Forum said they are warming to the concept of regional cooperation to solve tough problems such as traffic and air and water pollution.

"It's going to take moral courage of elected leaders to do the right thing," said Turlock City Councilman Kurt Vander Weide, reporting on a group discussion with other officeholders throughout the fast-growing valley.

A few other regions, including Sacramento and San Diego, have tasted success despite deep initial cynicism.

Marty Tuttle, former executive director of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, said people are more willing to compromise "when they know there is a comprehensive strategy to deal with growth."

Time-honored local control over land use decisions proved to be the "big elephant in the room" during the Sacramento region's blueprint process, Tuttle said. Leaders there finally got beyond it through constant reassurance that they wouldn't give it up altogether, and would make better decisions if armed with more solid information about what was going on in the rest of the area.

The same could work for the San Joaquin Valley, whose leaders are a year or two behind in the same process of producing a blueprint, or regional cooperation plan, Tuttle said.

"What's good for Fresno is good for Stockton, and what's good for Stockton is good for Modesto," he said. "You're all in it together."

Gov. Schwarzenegger sent his director of planning and research, Cynthia Bryant, to deliver a similar message.

"I understand you're fiercely independent," Bryant told the crowd. "You don't want anyone telling you what to do. That 'can-do' attitude is what I love about California.

"But the challenge is so great, I don't think you can do it alone," she continued. "To remain independent, you're going to have to work with the state, other entities and most importantly, each other."

She quoted from the governor's recent speech in Eureka, where he said: "Sacramento is not where the action is. We coordinate. On the local level is where all the answers are."

Gregg Albright, deputy director of the California Department of Transportation, said, "We recognize that the valley here is absolutely critical" to California's future. "If we don't proactively approach this and think about where we're going to go, I can tell you, the future is going to be ugly."

Regional approach to emissions

Much of the day's fireworks sprang from a presentation on Senate Bill 375, which would require that regions adopt emission reduction targets to address climate change.

William Craven, chief consultant to the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Water, said local government would not give up land use control and that the bill would not affect projects in the pipeline. It passed in the Senate but bogged down in the Assembly while its author, Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, negotiates with cities, counties, regional transportation planning agencies and the building industry.

"The process is often brutal but is working in this instance," Craven said. "I think it's generally recognized as a good effort."

Fresno City Councilman Jerry Duncan noted that the bill so far has drawn support only from Democratic legislators. "To me, that doesn't come across as a real bipartisan effort," Duncan said.

And Kern County Supervisor Jon McQuiston said, "I'm not surprised the environmental groups are not opposed; I'd almost say they couldn't have written it better."

Los Banos Councilwoman Anna Brooks reminded the audience how building approvals by one agency can affect another. Plans for 5,000 new jobs, and no homes, in Coyote Creek Valley would enrich that area, leaving her city with the costly burden of housing new employees, she said.

"Does it make sense to create more greenhouse gas emissions by people having to travel over the hill (to work)?" Brooks said.

Some leaders agreed that land use conflicts are taking center stage as regions throughout the state draw up blueprints.

"The genie is out of the bottle," Tuttle said. "Land use is now a key focus of public policy."

David Hosley, president of Modesto-based Great Valley Center, said, "The state has always had conflict with local governments on land use. Because of greenhouse gas and all the things going on with global warming, planning has become sexy. No one in Sacramento knows planning. You (local leaders) know it here."

The forum drew officeholders from Ceres, Atwater, Merced, Turlock and Modesto, though no supervisor from Stanislaus County attended. No local agency was better represented than Patterson, which sent three of its five council members.

Patterson Mayor Becky Campo said a controversial proposal to transform the former naval airbase at Crows Landing into a hulking industrial park has heightened her group's awareness of the value of cooperating with neighbors. Her council vehemently opposes West Park's plan but has been unable to stop it.

Criticism from Stanislaus County's West Side came "too little, too late," Campo said. "If we had been in the loop from the very beginning, maybe things would have been different and we wouldn't be fighting it. It's kind of unfortunate."