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Vision Working Paper Merced County's Regional Vision for the San Joaquin Valley

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The San Joaquin Valley Council of Governments and other Blueprint partners include:



KernCOG



KingsCOG



San Joaquin Valley
Air Pollution Control District

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Now...Is the Time

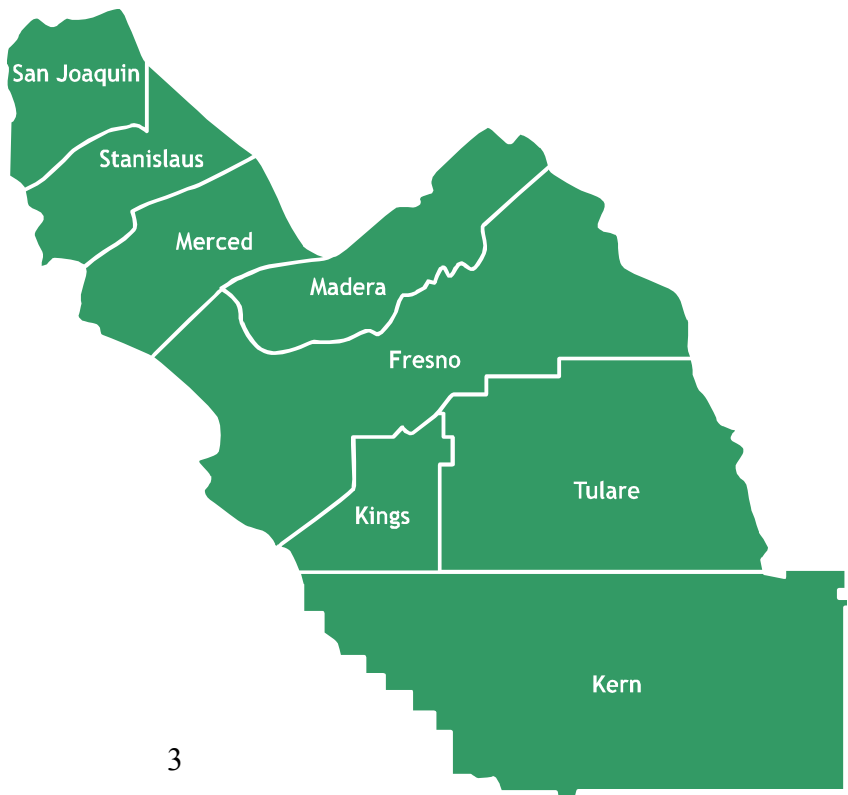
The San Joaquin Valley Region is a place we wish to protect, yet advance -- with its pristine farmland and priceless wetlands; its vast open spaces; its small town communities and historic Main Streets. If we wish to enhance the quality of life for the people who live in and cherish this Valley, then we must answer the call, before it's too late.

The call is to create our own destiny and take hold of our future and our children's future. It is a heart felt call to those of us who believe the San Joaquin Valley is the last Great Valley. It is a call to come together and collaborate as a region, not as disparate entities seeking a required end, but as a unified region seeking a desired end. It is an end that could also mark a new beginning for the San Joaquin Valley.

For the first time, the people of this region are participating in a San Joaquin Valley Blueprint visioning process to identify core values and define a preferred vision for the future, 2050. The choices we make will direct growth in a way that will make our lives better tomorrow than they were yesterday. These choices is what the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint is all about and is the one call we must not only answer but also master, in order to provide a future that we will cherish.

This can only occur if we, as an informed and involved region, are willing to work together with a clear vision for the future. This is where the vision comes in, both as a means to define our regional desires and as a tool to help us realize them. Please, join us as we envision our future together.

Now...is the time.



Introduction: Blueprint Visioning

Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) along with the other seven Central San Joaquin Valley Council of Governments (San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings, and Kern) began the San Joaquin Valley Regional Blueprint Planning Process with a three simple questions in mind:

What are the values of the residents of the eight-county Central San Joaquin Valley region?

What values are most important to the quality of life for residents in the eight-county, 27,000 square mile region, of the Central San Joaquin Valley?

How can these values be translated into a Blueprint regional vision, that accommodates growth and enhances the Valley's quality of life in a way that reflects local community values?

To help answer these questions, the San Joaquin Valley Councils of Governments (COG's) have initiated an extensive, multi-faceted public outreach process in each of their own counties. This process was designed to:

- Introduce value sharing sessions,
- Build upon the successes of previous planning efforts,
- Include current knowledge about growth, resources and decisions already in place, and
- Solicit public comments throughout the planning process, from quality-of-life values,
- Establish a regional vision based on common values,
- Identify and form consensus on a preferred alternative 2050 Blueprint growth scenario.

Not all of the SJV COG's have completed their visioning workshops at this time. It is anticipated the all of the SJV COG's will be finished with the Blueprint visioning outreach phase no later than April.

Continuing opportunities for public engagement will occur in the dialogue about the region's long-range future as the Councils of Government move forward through each component of the Blueprint planning process.

The Goal

The goal of the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Planning Process is to facilitate the public's development and implementation of a San Joaquin Valley Regional Vision addressing the growth of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern Counties, with an emphasis that shows the links between:

- Land Use
- Agricultural
- Environment
- Transportation
- Air Quality

Inherent in the planning process are the themes of the 3 E's (Economy, Environment and Social Equity). By working with the residents of the San Joaquin Valley to build a consensus,

we can preserve and enhance our region's quality of life, natural resources and economic prosperity.

The SJV Regional Blueprint project is a voluntary process involving concerned citizens – representing the business community, environmental organizations, neighborhoods and policy makers who share the common goal of addressing growth with sound planning. Planning that reflects the interests and values of San Joaquin Valley residents will become the core of the Blueprint plan.

The SJV Regional Blueprint process has no regulatory powers and does not seek to impose a plan on the region or its local governments. Instead, the SJV Regional Blueprint will work cooperatively with all entities and individuals to help guide the region toward a common vision for 2050 and beyond.

Background

Until now, individual San Joaquin Valley Counties have addressed their own needs through their own local governmental agencies and individual policies and practices. The concept of a regional identity for the San Joaquin Valley Region was an abstract and distant thought, due primarily to a lack of resources (fiscal revenue, shared data, state cabinet support, and federal agency recognition).

The SJV Regional Blueprint in collaboration with other regional efforts such as The San Joaquin Valley Partnership - Strategic Action Proposal, The Federal Interagency Task Force for the Economic Development of the San Joaquin Valley, Operation Clean Air, and the Affordable Communities Initiative for the San Joaquin Valley, has an opportunity to create a regional vision that will assist local agencies to implement policies which will provide an enhanced quality of life for its residents.

The San Joaquin Valley Regional Blueprint project has convened a Blueprint Regional Advisory Committee (BRAC) with the purpose of advising local Blueprint decision makers on regional recommendations for the creation of a San Joaquin Valley

Regional Blueprint. Each BRAC committee member is to:

- Become a champion of the final SJV Regional Blueprint vision;
- Advocate implementation of the SJV Regional Blueprint products to the local jurisdictions; and
- Promote the SJV Regional Blueprint strategies at the state and federal levels

Complex Issues – San Joaquin Valley

The San Joaquin Regional Blueprint planning process has evolved in response to an array of complex issues facing the region within a context of rapid change, uncertainty and public debate over proposed solutions.

Rapid Population Growth

How will we accommodate the anticipated population growth while preserving the qualities of the San Joaquin Valley that make this a unique place to call home?

Current Development Patterns

If the San Joaquin Valley continues with the current development

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policies, the pattern of low density development is likely to continue, making mobility and the preservation of sensitive natural areas more difficult. Population growth will add to travel demand and will impact an aging transportation infrastructure. It will also pose a threat to fragile wetlands, natural resources, and agricultural lands.

While we have made great strides in reducing the overall levels of air pollution in our valley, recent scientific research highlights the need to do more. Both the National Ambient Air Quality Standards and the State of California's air quality standards are becoming even more stringent and more health protective. The complex issue of how to clean the air while accommodating great population growth requires the cooperation and active participation of all the residents of the San Joaquin Valley.

The people of the San Joaquin Valley region are witnessing a remarkable regional metamorphosis. This change can be both beneficial and detrimental to our perception of this area and our quality of life, depending on one's point of view. Should we continue with current

development practices and, if so, will this achieve what we want for the future of the Valley?

Bigger Picture Decisions Are Needed

In order to address these challenges, we have come together as a region in an effort to understand how, both today and for tomorrow, we would like this region to grow.

The true questions are not "if " or "when" we will grow, but rather "how" and "where" to grow?

The Challenge - SJV Region

How can we, as a region ensure that our growth will remain a continued source of pride, vitality, diversity and opportunity, rather than a source of congestion, stagnation, division and inequity? Many sense that the quality of life here will not improve with more people and a continuation of the same actions, but will deteriorate over time. There are alternatives. The region has choices for the future of the Valley. The Blueprint provides an opportunity to define a regional vision.

Developing the SJV Blueprint Vision

The San Joaquin Valley Blueprint evolved from an understanding that projected population growth would have an enormous impact on the region... The purpose of the Blueprint is to build consensus around a vision, so that as a region we may preserve and enhance our region's quality of life, natural resources and economic prosperity.

The vision process has taken shape as we have listened to citizens in public workshops, surveys and other community outreach methods. During this time, we have found common threads of concern, and we are weaving these threads into our San Joaquin Valley Regional Vision; a vision that will accommodate an estimated 4.6 million new residents in the next 50 years.

We hope to envision the means by which the region can absorb these newcomers and better serve those already here in a manner that preserves and enhances our sense of place and quality of life.

The Blueprint outreach process has identified a common consensus of Merced County that residents are concerned about how growth has occurred in the past and recognize the need to forge a different approach to future growth. The expression of these concerns and

the discussion of possible solutions are the first steps in developing a regional vision for the Valley.

Visioning - What the Public Wants

Data collected from Merced County Blueprint visioning sessions can be summarized in four common acknowledgements:

1. We cannot continue doing business as usual and expect different results

People are concerned about the prospect of more people living here, and they voiced strong support for fresh approaches, open discussions, and innovative thinking and planning to accommodate the additional population.

Valley residents also called for the preservation of those qualities that make the San Joaquin Valley special. Our remarkable natural environment, our vibrant agriculture economy, our cultural diversity and the unique character of our communities and neighborhoods were all identified as valuable assets that should be protected and enhanced as our region changes.

Residents support a vision where land use plans, policies, and market forces can provide creative solutions.

The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them. ~Albert Einstein

2. Growth needs to occur in an efficient manner

People voiced a desire for more choices in their lives – in transportation (a mix of roads and transit), housing (type, affordability and location) and opportunities (education, interests and jobs). The people want a vision that produces more options so that people can choose a means of transportation, find suitable housing and pursue opportunities they find desirable.

3. They want to stay involved

Many participants expressed gratitude and enthusiasm for the process initiated by the Blueprint. They want to be involved in creating a positive future for our region. Even with the challenges and issues before us, the participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss the trade-offs generated by growth and want to continue the dialogue as we move forward.

4. Create a desirable future for the San Joaquin Valley by working together

Many participants saw the benefits of looking at our concerns as a region rather than individually. They also recognized the need to develop a voice for the San Joaquin Valley and

an understanding that we are more effective working together.

Basic Human Needs

What do we want? What do we value?

As a region would all like to believe that we are unique with our own individual needs. Yet in reality, most of us have similar needs, wants, and desires, including:

- A good quality of life for ourselves and our families;
- Safe and secure communities;
- Quality educational opportunities;
- A well-paying job in close proximity to support ourselves and our families;
- A decent place to live and call home;
- Good health;
- New technology to maintain competitiveness;
- Freedom to travel;
- Clean Air;
- Reliable energy sources;
- Clean and abundant water;
- Social equity and fair treatment;
- Sustainable natural resources (open space and recreation); and a
- Reliable transportation system with alternatives.

A Reality Check - Limited Resources

This short list shows that everyone wants it all. The real question is - Can every resident of the Valley have it all when choosing our future and a preferred 2050 Blueprint Vision?

In reality, because of limited resources, not every person can have it all. What we can do is develop a regional vision based on common values that will lead to consensus on a preferred regional vision that will benefit all.

Q. Will there be easy choices as well as difficult choices?

A. Yes.

Q. Will the current Blueprint efforts have all of the answers?

A. No.

Q. Will there be trade-offs and calculated risks based on the best information available at the time?

A. Yes.

Q. Is there a better time to get started on creating our own vision for the future?

A. No.

The natural resources of the Valley are not unlimited, and when they are gone they will be lost forever. The San Joaquin Valley is truly that last great agricultural valley that remains in California.

What Are Our Basic Values?

*B*y listening to what Merced County residents told us about their quality of life values, planners and decision makers can help ensure that plans stay on track and develop solutions that respect what people care about most.

Merced visioning efforts throughout the county showed that residents have common values regardless of the community in which they live.

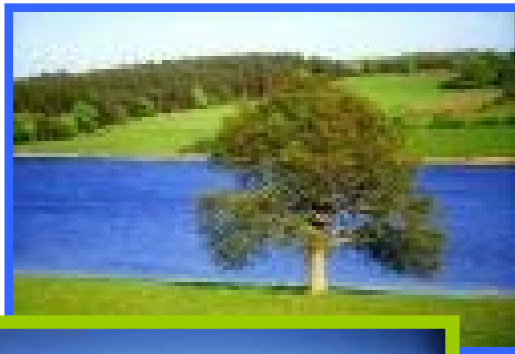
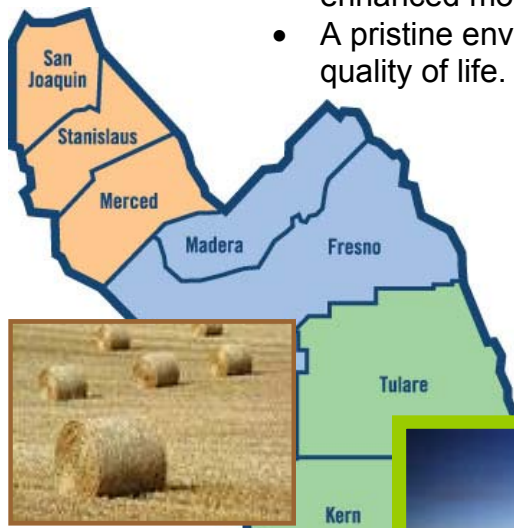
While hundreds of Merced County values were identified, several themes were common to the entire county.

A Vision of the Future

Merced County residents envision the San Joaquin Valley as Central California's oasis. A place that includes a vibrant economy that is globally connected; local policies that accommodate growth in a manner that uses land efficiently in order to maintain rural areas as well as develop healthy urban centers.

Merced County Residents have stated what they value and how these values shape the foundation of their ideal future for the San Joaquin Valley:

- Productive agricultural land and vast open spaces;
- Clean, unpolluted skies, with healthy air for all the valley's residents
- Urbanized areas that are compact efficient and self sufficient;
- Prosperous smaller cities that retain their individual identities;
- A world class, multi-modal transportation network providing connectivity and enhanced mobility; and
- A pristine environment and abundant resources to maintain an outstanding quality of life.



What We Heard:

Merced County's Vision for the San Joaquin Valley

- *Accommodate* growth and future development while creating and maintaining sustainable communities.
- *Improve* cooperation among all governmental agencies at all levels.
- *Embrace* cultural diversity and value the richness of each individual.
- *Value* our neighborhoods, towns, rural areas, historic sites and landmarks.
- *Design* communities to create a positive, unique image/community theme.
- *Design* communities with quality sustainable, green building technologies.
- *Create* a vibrant and diverse economy with quality jobs designed to attract and retain college graduates.
- *Provide* entertainment, fine arts, and cultural amenities for retaining an educated workforce and for Valley residents.
- *Preserve* agricultural land.
- *Facilitate* the creation of a variety of quality affordable housing choices through well-designed walkable communities.
- *Create* an effective multi-modal transportation system that allows for efficient regional mobility while minimizing its impact on land.
- *Improve* access to quality healthcare services and state-of-the art facilities.
- *Improve* access to a variety of quality educational opportunities & promote a college-going culture.
- *Provide* for community services such that residents feel safe and secure.
- *Increase* the amount of available energy with consideration of alternative energy sources.
- *Improve* our air quality through thoughtful planning, education, and providing options to enable residents to make clean-air choices.
- *Preserve* our water resources, including natural waterways as well as clean and abundant drinking water sources.
- *Preserve* open space and green space for conservation and recreation.

Our Valley Our Future

The other seven SJV COG's will report their local values when visioning workshops have concluded.

Merced County's Values for the Future of the San Joaquin Region?

Sustainable Growth and Development

Growth should be accommodated in ways that use the region's agricultural, natural and financial resources efficiently. The vision calls for:

- Locating new growth within close proximity or adjacent to existing communities;
- Land use planning and development solutions that are regionally coordinated to support compact development and more efficient land use;
- Financial incentives that support efficient development and sustainable growth;
- Regional infrastructure needs to be collaboratively planned with funding strategies.

Preserve Agricultural Land

Creating a region wide plan for agriculture, the new long-range plan will:

- Ensure agriculture's sustainability in the region.
- Protect the most productive agriculture land in perpetuity.
- Lead to greater land efficiency
- Increase the public's appreciation of working farms
- Ensure Ag land's accessibility to reliable affordable water and other resources necessary to maintain the productivity of the land.

An Effective Transportation System That "Got Ahead of the Curve."

Changing current development trends that will help expand our and maximize transportation choices and enhance the effectiveness of transit. In turn, transit choices and a more effective roadway system could reduce congestion, even as our population grows. The vision calls for more choices, with:

- Consistently good highways and roadways that are adequately sized and well maintained.
- Built-in 'intermodal' alternatives to cars – rapid transit, bicycle lanes, trails, sidewalks and pedestrian features, buses and shuttles.
- HOV/HOT lanes that reward carpooling and transit, and streamline car travel.
- A regional highway system with freeways that are intermodally linked, with built-in alternatives to cars (e.g., embedded bike lanes, sidewalks), and denser areas and smaller cities' hubs on route.
- Transit that works and is coordinated with the locations of major employers, denser areas of housing, industry clusters and other modes of transportation.
- A transit system that could include rapid transit, rail (commuter, light and other) and rapid buses.
- Transit hubs that attract locally scaled business activity and investment as an attractive market alternative to current fragmented development patterns.

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- Four-lane, divided highways serving as East/West connectors (state routes) between I-5 and SR-99.

Quality Healthcare Services and Facilities

Access to quality healthcare for SJV residents that improves their quality of life without having to leave the region:

- Ensure that there is an adequate number of physicians to serve the population
- Encourage a regional view of meeting healthcare needs and create solutions to meet these needs
- Ensure that there is an adequate number of hospitals and healthcare facilities to serve the region

World-Class Education System with a College-Bound Culture

An educated society will build a foundation of residents who care about their community and their future quality of life. The Blueprint will support efforts that:

- Educate SJV residents on the value of completing a higher educational program and promote a regional college-bound culture.
- Increase the number of secondary educational programs or expand existing programs to serve the growing population.
- Ensure that SJV residents do not have to leave the region to attend proven educational programs.

An Economy That Is Vibrant and Diverse, With Job Opportunities Throughout the Region.

New development patterns – with clusters of business, industry and commerce in close proximity to residential areas linked with an effective and efficient transportation system – that will enhance our region’s economic viability. The vision calls for:

- A strong base of local businesses, large, medium and small situated near population centers.
- An emphasis on affordability and favorable cost of living is a key economic driver.
- A globally connected region, with job opportunities throughout the region, especially for the existing workforce.
- Robust smaller towns and communities across the region that are not overwhelmed by growth, and retain their identity and sense of community.
- Entrepreneurs as a continual source of vitality, jobs and economic growth.
- Full participation in the economic opportunities (jobs, advancement, business ownership and property ownership) by all socio-economic groups.
- Resources of state government and university systems harnessed to strengthen our region’s economy.
- Viable and vibrant downtowns in the large urban centers with areas devoted to residential, a unique history and artistic character, active streets full of life and

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activity both day and night – yet another regional draw for employers and employees.

- Smaller-scale, vibrant town centers and neighborhoods in surrounding communities.
- Easy connections to the world by Internet, air travel and telecommunications.

Improved Cooperation Among All Government Entities Including a Regionwide Understanding That Our Fortunes Are Tied Together.

To succeed the vision must also include:

- Support for local planning processes, both existing and future, with high citizen participation as a balanced means of realizing both local and regional goals and visions.
- Highly collaborative public/private sector dialogue, with market forces being a critical determinant in identifying and choosing courses of action.
- Respect for private property rights, laws and the importance of balance in planning decisions that affect landowners.
- The harnessing of market forces by giving consumers new choices and rewarding those who make the choices available.
- Vigorous private sector support and involvement in economic, civic and regional issues.
- The State of California, colleges and universities as partners in the San Joaquin Valley's future.
- Collaborative co-existence and problem solving among counties, cities, towns throughout our region.
- A new era of public engagement – forums, voting, volunteering and civic involvement in matters that will shape our future.
- Unified buy-in of multi-jurisdictional effort recognizing that every governmental authority is an equal partner in the process.

Sustainable Energy with Alternative Energy Sources Available

Ensure that the growing population uses energy efficiently to minimize energy usage and plan for projected growth

- Require developing communities to maximize the use of energy saving opportunities
- Ensure that there is additional energy available to sustain the growing population
- Support the thoughtful consideration of all sources of alternative energy

Actions That Demonstrate an Appreciation that Cultural Diversity is an Important Asset That Strengthens the Region.

A regional vision will be irrelevant to our community unless we make embracing our cultural diversity a part of the larger vision, with a process open to all. The vision must include respect, civility, and opportunities for all, regardless of race, color, religion, economic status, gender, ethnic or national origin, disability, sexual orientation or age. The vision for our region should include:

- A new focus on community and neighborhood planning to close the gaps for traditionally underserved populations – with emphasis on gaps in health, education, housing, jobs and transportation.
- Making all our children a priority from the earliest age, so they are nurtured and have opportunities for success.
- Appreciation of cultural differences beginning at an early age, going beyond tolerance to active celebration, and recognizing that our community is stronger because of them.

The Protection and Enhancement of Our Neighborhoods, Towns, Rural Areas, Historic Sites and Special Sense of Place.

Change and inevitable growth bring trade-offs, but we must retain our region's unique character by:

- Thinking and acting like a region, understanding that our futures are linked.
- Striving to understand, appreciate, protect, and maintain the unique features, neighborhoods, historic structures, and cultural characteristics of our cities and communities, and the choices and options they offer.
- Encouraging a sense of personal and community responsibility that is intolerant to crime.

A Variety of Housing Choices Affordable for Everyone in the Region.

Today, it is not easy to find affordable places to live – for many, it is non-existent, especially for lower-income families, youth and singles. A vision should address this issue by providing:

- New development patterns that generate more choices, especially more affordable choices.
- More traditional-styled neighborhoods with narrower, more pedestrian friendly streets that help build a sense of community.
- Areas with owner-occupied housing – townhomes, lofts, condominiums within walking distance of transit and parks, with storefront businesses.
- More efficient use of land and infrastructure to enhance affordable housing choices.

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Adequate Community Services That Assure Safety and Security

Communities must continually invest in public services infrastructure to meet the needs to current and future residents

- Promote regional programs that reduce crime rates
- Promote sustainable communities and not sprawling disconnected subdivisions

An Environment That Is Beloved and Protected Forever.

Reflecting a regionwide concern for environment, implementation of the Blueprint will result in:

- Expansion of open green space, parks and trails, designed for people, in the populated areas.
- The most ecologically sensitive land protected in perpetuity.
- Clean air, even as the population grows.
- Clean water in our lakes, creeks and aquifers.
- Sustainable water supplies, both surface and groundwater, for our region.

Where Do We Go From Here?

We understand and appreciate the concerns that have been expressed by neighborhood leaders that many years of hard work and community-based planning efforts may be over-ridden by this regional visioning process. As has been stated, the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint is presenting a vision for the region, and it will be the task of others to create a plan for a individual communities. Across the Valley many jurisdictions and communities have been working on growth related issues for many years. We acknowledge that the foundation of these planning efforts is a vision of what each local community wants for its future. We believe these local visions and plans, created with extensive citizen participation, should be respected as part of the broader regional vision produced from the Blueprint effort. We may debate various aspects of the plans as they come forward, but we will respect those plans and this vision statement is not intended to take precedence over the local plans but rather enhance their effectiveness.

We understand that there will be many challenges and obstacles to overcome before this vision becomes a reality. Whenever there is change, there will be differences and trade-offs, but we believe the short-term difficulties we encounter will be heavily out-weighed by the long-term benefits that can be achieved for the San Joaquin Valley. We believe the people of the San Joaquin Valley are looking for leadership to point us in the right direction, and the people are willing to do the things necessary to move in that direction.

Finally, we will work steadfastly to foster the regional point of view – to bring to the forefront the reality that we live in a single, integrated region that shares its future, its problems and its successes. We firmly believe that to succeed in the future, the San Joaquin Valley must approach issues together, with debate, collaboration, cooperation and wisdom. Collaboration requires bringing residents together, listening to one another, discovering the facts and then crafting solutions as a group. We are committed – not to knowing the answers automatically – but to the belief that together this special region can find solutions that enhance our livability.