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County takes lead in planning Valley's transportation

By Chris Collins

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In the next few years, planners from the eight counties that make up the San Joaquin Valley will put their heads together to outline a comprehensive scheme for the region.

Transportation, environment, development -- it will all be in the Regional Blueprint plan.

And leading the charge is Merced County.

Though easily dwarfed in population by adjacent counties and not known as a political powerhouse, the Merced County Association of Governments will take the reins on this newly funded project.

So how did medium-sized Merced get this responsibility?

"Because we raised our hands," said Marjie Kirn, the association's deputy director and the newly appointed point person for the blueprint plan.

Actually, it was a little more than that.

In 1993 the association led a Valley-wide effort to develop a Geographical Information Systems program for the region. It also worked with Mariposa and Mono counties in 2000 to put together the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System.

"The fact of the matter is that the process MCAG went through a few years ago gave them the background to do this," said Carol Whiteside, a former Modesto mayor and president of the Great Valley Center.

Kirn said the blueprint project is much bigger than any other regional plan her association has tackled before. But packaging transportation, housing, environmental and economic plans together in one cohesive outline is still doable, she said.

And the extra \$150,000 the association gets for administrative costs won't hurt.

"We are pretty confident we can coordinate this because of our other projects," Kirn said. "So, you know, you've got to try something new."

She said Merced County probably won't have a greater say in what will actually be included in the plan. The blueprint will be more of a "group consensus," she said.

Caltrans announced last week it would give the first \$2 million of the \$5 million planning project that is expected to take "at least two years," said Kirn. The plan will outline how the Valley should look a

few decades from now.

"It will be a rational outcome," Whiteside said. "It's so we can look back 20 years from now and say, 'Oh, there was a plan.' "

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