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## Our View: Merced's growing influence a positive

Opportunity upon us as county takes the lead in transportation planning for the Valley

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At first blush, one wouldn't think Merced County would be in a position to influence transportation developments for the entire San Joaquin Valley. We're just one somewhat small cog in a big wheel. But our community figures prominently in a long-range plan to shape the future of transportation in the Valley's eight counties.

The Merced County Association of Governments will head up formation of a Regional Blueprint plan. It's a tremendous opportunity to address the area's transportation, housing, environmental and economic needs. While Merced won't necessarily be the loudest voice in the overall scheme of things and the completed plan will have input from people from Stockton to Bakersfield, it's still a chance to wield extra influence in planning circles.

In the years ahead, many key decisions need to be made, particularly in making Highway 99 a more viable transportation option. Highway 99 is the major north-south transportation arterial for the central part of the state and it is seeing sizable volumes of traffic. It's showing lots of wear and tear from the daily pounding it receives and transportation planning needs to address the highway's long-term viability.

The Valley also is facing incredible pressures as development envelops the area. An urban-rural conflict rages and a sensible balance needs to be established between agriculture, new homes and industry. With the University of California, Merced now established and marked growth taking place here, Merced should be able to help craft reasonable responses to new residential, commercial and industrial developments expected in the next few years.

Planning, by its very definition, is a very long-range proposition. It involves looking into the future and making educated guesses about how things will be years down the road and what can be done to make things better. MCAG has a track record of proactive planning, particularly in forming the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System bus network now serving the national park and surrounding communities. It should be up to the task of spearheading a major regional planning effort.

For the next several years, Merced will be in the forefront of some advanced thinking, and our leaders need to make the best of an incredible opportunity.

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