

# Planners plot how to work as one for valley

Naming top five problems give pros  
a start on ideas to fix them as region

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Take 75 or so Northern San Joaquin Valley planners, put them in a room at the Stanislaus County Agricultural Center and ask them to pick the region's No. 1 issue.

That's precisely what happened Saturday, and the group decided that protecting farmland should top the list.

The planners, a combination of elected commissioners and professional planning staff members, came up with enough for a "Top Five," the other four of which are:

- More transportation options
- Achieving a jobs-housing balance
- Developing affordable housing
- Protecting rivers

No solutions were offered during the workshop, which was hosted by the Stanislaus County Planning Commission for the 30th consecutive year.

That wasn't the point.

Instead, planners listened to ideas about how they can come together to develop solutions to the Top Five and a number of other concerns.

Stanislaus County Planning Director Ron Freitas shared two quotes with the group at the outset of a 3½-hour session that he said he had picked up a day earlier at a planning conference in Clovis:

"Think beyond the borders of your jurisdictions."

Freitas added: "A lack of regional planning is the failure of planning in the United States."

Those ideas set the stage for the conference that followed, which featured separate workshops:

- The San Joaquin Valley Blue Print Process
- Developing a countywide growth management strategy

- A presentation on the Modesto and Turlock groundwater basins

Marjie Kirn, deputy executive director of the Merced Association of Governments, and associate planner Terri Lewis led the discussion on the ongoing, valleywide "blueprinting" process.

The valley's eight counties — Stanislaus, Merced, San Joaquin, Fresno, Madera, Tulare, Kings and Kern — are working with the Modesto-based Great Valley Center to develop a strategy to deal with growth and other common issues.

## All must work together

"We are developing a vision for the valley," Kirn said. "If we don't create a plan ourselves,

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Kirn said it was important to get all eight counties on the same page so they can work together rather than compete.

That strategy has worked in other areas of the state, Kirn noted — Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento and San Diego.

As a region, Kirn said, the valley is not "invited to the table" and misses out on state and federal money.

Kirn said the valley sends more tax dollars to Washington, D.C., than it receives in federal funding, adding that "it's our own fault."

At that point, Kirn took off her lecturer's cap and became a facilitator, asking the planners to think about what they wanted the valley to look like in 2050 and asked them to share ideas, questions and concerns.

A list of 75 to 80 ideas was whittled to five.

Kirn said the Top Five list developed Saturday was similar to the concerns expressed by elected officials, planners and private citizens in other parts of the valley.

Such surveys are an important part of the "bottom-up" approach under way in the blueprint process, Kirn said.

**On the Net:**  
[www.greatvalley.org/blueprint](http://www.greatvalley.org/blueprint)

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