

For Immediate Release

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SJV Counties Hold Blueprint Workshops To Build Valley-wide Vision

*SJV vision will be offered as a foundation for land use planning,
transportation, housing for next 35 years*

MERCED, Calif., March 12, 2006 – They were concentrating so hard on what they had been told to look for that 78% of those watching the video couldn't see the gorilla in the room.

And that was the point.

The gorilla video was one of many devices used during Regional Blueprint workshops to help planners, civic leaders, and residents realize that when people are focused so tightly on their area of interest, bigger issues can be overlooked.

Officially called the San Joaquin Valley Regional Blueprint Program in Merced County, the program hopes to coordinate a regional proposal for the future, provide planning tools and, eventually, adopt the vision shared by the eight counties in the SJV. The Blueprint is its second year, funded by a \$1.95 million grant from Caltrans.

While regional Blueprint programs have been completed in other areas of California, the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) program began in January 2006 with a \$2 million grant. Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) was chosen as the lead agency to work with the other councils of governments and help them initiate local Blueprint programs, which will then be combined into a valley-wide vision. Everything proposed through this process will ultimately have to be embraced by the local decision makers.

“This is a huge effort – one that hasn't been done before,” says Marjie Kirn, Deputy Executive Director of MCAG, who is heading the Blueprint effort. “This will give us a sense of where we have commonality throughout the Valley. This will help us focus.”

The Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley established by the Governor is examining very similar issues at the regional level. The goal of the Partnership's Land Use Working Group is to develop a macro strategy for the region; localizing the strategy is another part of the

challenge. The Partnership's macro strategy will be examined through the Blueprint Planning Process and recommendations incorporated into the regional blueprint plan.

In Merced County, 24 public workshops were held from Aug. 2006-Feb. 2007. Half were combined with the county's 2 ½ year program to update the county general plan. At those workshops, residents marked up large maps of their communities, identifying the top assets and problem areas. Residents discussed their community's future, then discussed the Valley's future.

Spotting the Gorilla

There were a number of "ah-ha" moments, when workshop facilitators could see participants' mental light bulbs come on. One such moment was in Ballico.

According to MCAG Associate Planner Terri Lewis, "We had been discussing changes to the valley that will occur over the next 30 years, when people started acknowledging that they accepted the fact that the population will go from 3.3 million in the valley to 7-8 million. The discussion had been thoughtful before, but, all at once, you could feel it shift to a deeper level."

Other moments occurred in Delhi and Los Banos when people talked about preserving agricultural land, then realized that ag was, in some areas, an untapped resource. What followed was a discussion of how to develop ag tourism.

At a workshop with the Board and staff of Healthy House in Merced, the group realized that future funds would be much better spent in a positive way, so they concentrated on a future with more recreational programs for kids and fewer parole officers.

And in Atwater, the discussion focused on planning for the future in a way that was the right thing to do over what would be the most popular.

"Most everyone focused on the positives in our future, the opportunities, rather than just complaining about problems," said Kirm. "The discussions were very thoughtful." She added that people really do like living here. "They realize that we can be even better if we work together as a valley to plan for our future. We need to have a regional voice, when it's needed."

Next Steps for Blueprint

Once the rest of the SJV counties have completed their Blueprint visions, different scenarios for the future will be compiled. Those scenarios will then be presented to the public for discussion. Within two years, a scenario preferred by Valley residents will be presented to all local jurisdictions for adoption as a foundation for local planning.

About MCAG

MCAG is an association of city and county governments, with members who meet to solve regional problems such as transportation, solid waste, and air quality. More information can be found at www.mcag.cog.ca.us, or by calling (209) 723-3153, ext. 308.