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San Joaquin Valley poorer, fatter, less educated than rest of state

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New study finds some good things associated with life in the valley and a lot bad

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San Joaquin Valley people are poorer, fatter, less educated and more exposed to crime compared with other Californians, according to a first-of-its-kind study obtained by The Bee.

On the other hand, drivers from Stockton to Bakersfield car-pool more and wait less in traffic, and buyers and renters find more affordable housing than almost anywhere else in the state, the report says.

Earlier and smaller-scale studies have suggested similar findings, but none has compared well-being indicators in defined areas across the state like the inaugural California Regional Progress Report.

Its collaborators put the report online for all to see, but could not agree on a public unveiling in late June and have yet to present it to media.

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"If we want to measure progress in how we live in California, we have to do it region by region," said Rusty Selix, executive director of the California Association of Councils of Governments. He briefed Gov. Schwarzenegger's office on the Regional Progress Report on Wednesday.

For the report's purposes, the San Joaquin Valley, emerging in political clout, includes San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern counties. The valley's population swelled 16.4 percent to 3.87 million from 2000 to 2006 — the fastest growth rate in California.

"We've been the ignored region for the last 20 years," said Merced's Marjie Kirn, who is spearheading a planning effort for the eight-county consortium. "We need to get our act together, speak as a region and get attention at the state level for what we need."

While some regions, such as the Bay Area and Southern California, have combined some regional planning functions, the San Joaquin Valley is the only region with eight agencies cooperating as one in the state's voluntary Regional Blueprint Planning Program.

"That's quite a remarkable accomplishment," said Carol Whiteside, founder of the Modesto-based Great Valley Center, a think tank whose reach extends north to Redding.

Some of California's 14 regions in the report were defined by boundaries of federally designated Metropolitan Planning Agencies. Others were grouped according to geography or by shared economies.

"There is a very clear move toward regional management of some of these important issues," said Whiteside, former Modesto mayor and former member of Gov. Wilson's Cabinet. "People have gotten past individual jurisdictions."

Air quality and underground water, for example, respect no county line. Neither do commute patterns. And one agency's approval of a huge shopping mall certainly can affect nearby cities and even counties.

"We could say that we should have done this a long time ago," said Selix, of the association of councils, "but we could also say that the public wasn't ready for it. Now they are."

"The 'duh' factor is there when you talk to people outside government," he continued. "This is how business thinks, in terms of markets" and not artificial boundaries.

The Regional Progress Report found plenty lacking in the San Joaquin Valley, which placed dead last in measures of income, increased fuel consumption, post-high school degrees, the obesity rate, and violent and property crimes.

The valley also performed poorly in asthma rates and air pollution, the study says.

Despite historically backward jobs-housing ratios, valley leaders continue approving more homes



and luring fewer employers, and they allow the paving of more farmland than almost anywhere else, the study says.

Despite an affinity for subdivisions, leaders aren't keeping pace with affordable housing, the report says.

A few bright spots shine through.

Although valley wages remain rock-bottom in California, the median household income is increasing third-fastest among state regions, the study says. And homes here are among the most affordable in California.

Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties placed second only to Fresno and Kern counties for least traffic congestion, and both pairs are in the valley's eight-county region.

The state Department of Transportation and Department of Housing emerged as main players in the Regional Progress Report. But those agencies, caught up in a heated Capitol debate on the overdue state budget, delayed a formal public rollout for the report.

"The Progress Report can be used as a baseline to guide investment decisions for the \$42.7 billion in infrastructure bonds approved by the voters in November 2006," reads an Internet introduction to the report.

But that money figures prominently in the seven-week state budget impasse. Transportation commissioners have put on hold hundreds of millions of dollars in highway and transit projects until the stalemate ends.

"We weren't sure how to present this (Regional Progress Report) to the media, so we didn't," Selix said. State legislators should receive it soon, he said.

Former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown caused a stir in 1990 when he proposed that hundreds of local agencies throughout California dissolve and reform as seven multipurpose regional governments. A firestorm of criticism killed the idea, although regional cooperation is again building momentum as a sensible solution to many problems, Whiteside said.

Much of the Regional Progress Report's data were extracted from work by area Blueprint committees, such as the valley's eight-county consortium.

The California Center for Regional Leadership, based in San Francisco, a spinoff of the James Irvine Foundation, produced the report.

Working with Whiteside's Great Valley Center, Blueprint committees in each of the valley's eight counties continue holding outreach workshops to develop plans for the valley's future.

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