

Northern News

NORTHERN SECTION, CALIFORNIA CHAPTER, AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

Central Valley Counties: Should They Join ABAG?

By Eric Parfrey, BASELINE Environmental Consulting

FEBRUARY 1998

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Back when Carol Whiteside was serving as mayor of Modesto, she once (somewhat facetiously) asked whether Stanislaus County should be allowed to join the Association of Bay Area Governments, the regional planning council for the nine counties surrounding San Francisco Bay. Her reasoning was simple: surveys showed that more than half of the families that were buying homes in Modesto's newest subdivisions were commuting to jobs in the Bay Area.

In 1988, Whiteside's request was met with polite chuckles from Bay Area officials and ABAG staff, and dismissed without serious debate. Carol Whiteside went on to serve as the director of intergovernmental affairs in the Wilson

administration, but she resigned last August to assume the position of founding president of the Great Valley Center, a non-profit organization based in Modesto, devoted to the study and advancement of California's Central Valley.

Ten years later, an elected official in Alameda County has again raised the idea of expanding ABAG to include adjacent counties in the northern San Joaquin Valley. The notion deserves more serious consideration the second time around. However, a civilized debate about whether ABAG should be expanded to reflect the growing "commute shed" toward the east may be difficult until a recent lawsuit that has been filed by Alameda County against the City of Tracy is resolved. What began as a friendly discussion about regional cooperation and traffic has quickly degenerated into legal brawl. Now the issue is less about regional coordination than it is about

whether the Alameda County Board of Supervisors will try to stop suburban sprawl in Tracy, or at least force the City to mitigate its growth impacts.

Some of the enormous demand for affordable housing in the region will be satisfied in eastern Contra Costa County and in the planned growth areas of East Dublin and North Livermore. The specific plan for the North Livermore growth area appears to be on track after years of being bogged down in lawsuits and negotiations between Alameda County and the City of Livermore, and sewer outfall capacity issues are finally being resolved. But in Contra Costa, a shift in political philosophy on the county Board of Supervisors may spell the end of the growth era in that county. Environmental groups are circling around the last of the mega-projects proposed in the unincorporated area, the Tassajara Valley and Cowell Ranch developments.

Along with eastern Contra Costa and Alameda, the southern portion of San Joaquin County, 75 miles east of San Francisco, has become a hotspot for development activity. The prime farmlands of San Joaquin support a \$1.2 billion array of cash crops, making it the fifth most productive agricultural county in California and tenth most productive in the United States. But developers, with the help of willing local politicians, are moving ahead aggressively with plans to develop at least 30,000 acres of farmland, in order to provide cheap housing for Bay Area commuters and to build a series of theme parks for tourists.

Much of the development frenzy is occurring in the southern part of the county, near the base of the Altamont Pass. The cities of Tracy and Lathrop, as well as San Joaquin

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It will be fascinating to watch how these regional planning and growth issues are resolved over the next several years.

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What a fantastic place the Bay Area is! What a beautiful state California is! After an eight month project in Cincinnati, Ohio, it is great to be home. I learned a lot in Cincinnati, and was able to visit a number of other midwestern and eastern U.S. cities. As a result, my appreciation for California and this country in general is much greater. As a non-California resident once told me, "ya know, the rest of this country ribs Californians for using terms like 'awesome dude,' but in my experience, and others who have been to California will attest, it is the only state that is truly awesome." Surfers have always known, and I agree with them. The sheer density of planners in the Northern Section lends itself to a region where planning issues actually shape agenda, and to that end, the services provided by the Northern Section and the California Chapter are unparalleled by other APA sections or Chapters.

This is an exciting time for the Northern Section. We have a number of new Board members, and individuals who are taking active roles in the various Regional Advisory Committees (RACs). The RACs were established a few years ago to provide localized services for the Northern Section's various regions. These services don't just happen, you have to get involved. The East Bay and East Counties RACs are looking for a few good people; if you are interested in joining them, contact Michael Neuman or Greg Mattson (see directory for telephone numbers). Participation does not have to be a major time commitment, and can consist of helping to organize specific events or report on planning issues in a given area.

The Northern Section Board held its annual retreat on January 31. One of the main topics of discussion was policy and advocacy issues and how the Board addresses them. A couple of years ago, the Board decided to begin addressing legislation or issues that have planning significance. Patti Jeffery, Diana Elrod, and other Board members have been working on establishing a policy group to discuss and suggest positions on issues as they arise. We also have a number of members who represent the Northern Section on various boards and commissions around the Bay. APA's influence continues to spread. How can you be a part of it?

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Caltrain Land Use Symposium

Caltrain will be sponsoring a tri-county land use symposium. This half-day program will include a panel discussion on successfully building transit-oriented developments and facilitated group sessions covering a wide range of subjects related to the line between land use and transportation. Caltrain will also provide material for self-guided transit-oriented development tours along its line. Continental breakfast and lunch will be provided.

Date: February 27, 1998
Time: Begins 7:15 a.m.
Place: Bay Meadows Racecourse,
San Mateo
Information: 650-508-6420



NSCCAPA Awards Program

When was the last time you had a planning deadline that was more than two months away? Now you do. The Northern Section is accepting nominations for its annual awards program until April 10. Application information is available from Wayne Goldberg, who can be reached at (707) 543-3220. Award submittals will be judged by a panel of Northern Section planners, and successful candidates will be forwarded to the state and possibly national juries for additional consideration. So if your agency has been involved with a noteworthy or innovative program, consider submitting an application. Wait until the last minute if you must, but submit that application!



The Bulletin Board section of the Northern News is intended to provide a forum for individuals to provide the membership with information about events or current topics. If you would like to submit an item for the Bulletin Board section, contact the Newsletter Editor at (408) 868-1231.

**The Dead Sea is Dying
(and other transnational nations aren't doing so well either)**

Planning and organizing for sustainable development and environmental management in the context of the Middle East peace process will be the topic of a presentation by Irwin Mussen. The Dead Sea and Gulf of Aqaba are two of the extremely sensitive ecosystems experiencing uncoordinated development and environmental degradation. Mr. Mussen is an advisor to EcoPeace, an organization established by a consortium of Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian environmental advocacy organizations. Mr. Mussen's presentation will show slides illustrating examples of the unique conditions and extreme problems facing this region. He will discuss planning and strategy approaches by EcoPeace for the Dead Sea and Gulf of Aqaba regions.

Date: February 25, 1998
Time: Refreshments 5:30 p.m.
Presentation 6:00 p.m.
Place: San Francisco AIA Office
130 Sutter Street, 6th floor
Parking: Sutter/Stockton garage
BART: Montgomery Street Station
Cost: \$5.00
RSVP: 415-281-0195
(NSCCAPA Voicemail)

1998 California Preservation Foundation Conference

The California Preservation Foundation (CPF) and Berkeley Architectural Heritage Foundation (BAHA) will co-host the 1998 California Preservation Foundation Conference in Berkeley from May 7 through May 10. The theme will highlight "New Perspectives on Preservation." Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston, South Carolina, a pro-historic preservation mayor, will be a featured speaker. For more information, contact Jeff Eichenfield at CPF at (510) 763-0972 or visit the conference website at www.jspub.com/~jsp/preserve/cpf.html.

Central Valley ...

County, are gearing up for the next wave of suburban growth, to provide housing for those eager commuters to the East Bay and the Silicon Valley. The aggressive growth plans adopted by Tracy city fathers unabashedly brag that the town of 45,000 residents wants to quadruple its population to 165,000 over the next 20 to 40 years. In addition, the county's Board of Supervisors in 1994 approved the 16,000-unit Mountain House "new town," located on the San Joaquin-Alameda county line. And planning for the huge 7,000-acre Gold Rush City theme park and housing project is proceeding in Lathrop, even though the Sierra Club and the California Farm Bureau Federation have sued to invalidate the project's EIR.

Ten years after Mayor Whiteside proposed that Stanislaus County should be allowed to join ABAG, at least one East Bay politician has resurrected the idea of expanding the Bay Area's regional council to include counties on the east side of the Altamont Pass. No one is laughing anymore. Supervisor Scott Haggerty, the lone Republican on the Alameda County board who represents the eastern portion of the county, has proposed that San Joaquin County, located north of Modesto and Stanislaus County, be invited to join ABAG.

Haggerty believes San Joaquin should become a part of ABAG because of the unprecedented amount of urban growth that is being planned at the base of the Altamont Pass near Tracy, which could impact roads and services in the East Bay. The supervisor has already initiated a series of meetings between himself, Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier of Contra Costa County, and Supervisor Bob Cabral of San Joaquin County. The three have agreed to continue meeting with a wider group of city officials, environmental, farmer, and developer interests.

The underlying issue that has sparked the regional planning efforts of the three counties is, as always, the need to mitigate the cumulative impacts of regional growth on the areas's freeways. Alameda and Contra

(continued from page 1)

Costa counties are on the verge of adopting a regional traffic impact mitigation fee for the Tri-Valley area, which includes the I-680 freeway corridor in San Ramon and the I-580 corridor in Pleasanton-Dublin-Livermore. At the same time, Alameda County has a restrictive "gateway" policy that prohibits additional lane widening of the I-580 freeway at the Altamont Pass. Supervisor Haggerty and other Alameda officials are fearful that unrestrained growth east of the Altamont could adversely impact main routes into the East Bay, especially if San Joaquin jurisdictions don't require new development to contribute adequate traffic mitigation fees to pay for needed improvements.

The issue of regional cooperation and traffic mitigation has recently come to a head over several large housing projects that are being processed in Tracy. Beginning late last year, Supervisor Haggerty and Alameda County staff attempted to negotiate with the City of Tracy over the traffic analysis and possible mitigation for two pending specific plans, the Tracy Hills and South Schulte projects. The two plans together would allow construction of 11,000 homes, equal to the next 30,000 residents in Tracy. Another 5,000 housing units are expected to be approved elsewhere in the city in the short term.

Alameda County planners began their discussions with Tracy by commenting on the inadequacy of the EIR for the Tracy Hills project. Alameda County joined the local Caltrans district staff and other public agencies in criticizing the EIR for failing to adequately document how the cumulative traffic impacts from the two project's 250,000 daily vehicle trips could be handled without causing gridlock on the adjacent I-580 and I-205 freeways, and local roads.

During several public hearings on the Tracy Hills project held over the last two months, the Tracy Council and staff refused to admit that the EIR was deficient and needed further analysis, even in the face of widespread and persistent criticism from area residents, Caltrans, San Joaquin County and its

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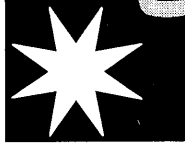


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1998 Preliminary Programs detailing the conference program, housing options, and registration information will be mailed in December.

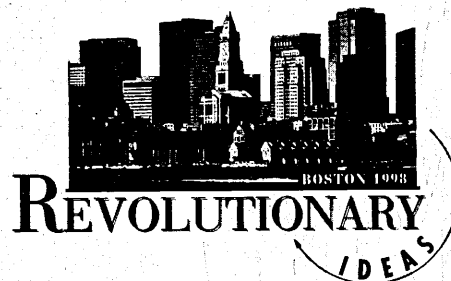
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Council of Governments, the Farm Bureau, Alameda County, and other public agencies. The Tracy council has so far refused to require the developers to pay for any improvements on the rural roads that connect the two counties (Tesla and Patterson Pass Roads) or on the I-580 freeway. The City rebuffed all requests for further information about how the project would mitigate traffic impacts on nearby freeways, how water and sewer service would be provided, and whether any Williamson Act contracts on agricultural lands would have to be canceled to accommodate the first phase of development.

The uncooperative manner with which the City Council and staff handled their critics clearly doomed any efforts to negotiate a settlement prior to the unanimous 5-0 Council vote for the project. At their January 5th meeting, the City Council adopted a condition of approval that would require the developer to pay any regional traffic impact fees that may be adopted in the future, but the gesture did not mollify Alameda County. One week later, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to file a lawsuit challenging the adequacy of the Tracy Hills EIR.

During the week leading up to the final approval of Tracy Hills, the Tracy mayor and some councilmembers talked about the need for regional cooperation and promised to work with adjacent counties to identify funding for future regional traffic improvements, but their vague promises did not fool anyone. Critics noted that Tracy is the only city in San Joaquin County that has steadfastly refused to adopt an interim regional traffic fee developed by the county's Council of Governments. If Tracy will not even require their developers to pay a very low regional fee in San Joaquin County, there is little possibility that the Council will seriously consider adopting a much higher per-unit traffic fee to help fund freeway improvements in Alameda and/or Contra Costa County.

In addition to criticism over traffic analysis and mitigation, the Tracy Hills project has

also raised alarms with farmers and environmental groups over the project's proposed water supply. The developer has bought or optioned a 900-acre farm in western Madera County and proposes to strip the allotment of irrigation water from the farm to serve the Tracy Hills project. The developer proposes to "wheel" the agricultural water (take the water out of the Delta-Mendota Canal) one hundred miles north in Tracy. Without the water supply from the canal, the farm in Madera County would be forced to pump groundwater, drawing down the regional water aquifer, or the farm would be allowed to go fallow and return to desert-like conditions.

The San Joaquin Farm Bureau, joined by water officials and at least one local supervisor in Fresno County, have denounced the plan and say they plan to fight the water transfer. The groups oppose the idea of agricultural water being transferred from one part of the Central Valley to fuel suburban sprawl in another area. The water supply and transfer issue may encourage these parties to join in the Alameda County lawsuit or file their own legal challenge.

It will be fascinating to watch how these regional planning and growth issues are resolved over the next several years. An optimist could hope that the litigation between Alameda County and Tracy would light a fire underneath the collective backsides of bureaucrats and politicians on both sides of the Altamont Pass, and force them to come up with an acceptable plan to mitigate regional traffic impacts. However, a pessimist would note that the pending litigation is just one more example of the lawyers taking over the process after the planners have failed to negotiate a compromise.

Eric Parfrey is senior planner with BASELINE, a private consulting firm in Emeryville. He previously served as senior planner for Contra Costa and San Joaquin counties, and now lives in Stockton. He began his planning career at ABAG in the early 1980s.



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NORTHERN SECTION CALENDAR

February

- 25 Dead Sea Region Discussion, San Francisco
27 Caltrain Land Use Symposium, San Mateo

March

- 5 NSCCAPA Board Meeting, Oakland

FEBRUARY

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MARCH

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| 29 | 30 | 31 | | | | |

◆ NEW MEETING LOCATION ◆

Beginning in March 1998, NSCCAPA Board meetings will move to ABAG Headquarters, located within the Bort MetroCenter at the intersection of 8th and Oak Streets in Oakland, adjacent to the Lake Merritt BART Station. Other 1998 meeting dates are: May 7, July 9, September 3, and November 5. All interested are welcome at these meetings!

APA Northern News
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