



Traffic planning now targeting rural areas, small towns

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A regional land-use planning project that has focused on reducing urban sprawl and traffic congestion in the Sacramento metropolitan area is now zooming in on small towns and rural communities.

Mike McKeever, executive director of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, said the agency will take a closer look at the "rural-urban connection" as an outgrowth of its Blueprint project.

McKeever discussed the new effort during a presentation Thursday to the El Dorado County Transportation Commission.

The Blueprint project involved elected officials, community leaders and residents throughout the six-county Sacramento region in workshops to consider future land-use patterns. That led to SACOG's adoption in 2004 of a preferred scenario that emphasized more compact development and transportation alternatives.

As the regional agency charged with distributing state and federal transportation funds, SACOG has used the Blueprint to develop the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, which projects transportation and road improvements needed through 2035. The final plan will be presented to the SACOG board for adoption this month.

SACOG is made up of Sacramento, El Dorado, Placer, Yolo, Sutter and Yuba counties, and 22 cities.

"It's fair to say the Blueprint ... really focused on urban patterns," McKeever said. "It didn't focus on the rural economy as much."

But SACOG represents more small jurisdictions than large ones, he said, and the economic challenges facing farmers, vintners, small businesses and small cities differ from those in larger urban areas.

"Part of the whole strategy is to make sure that rural areas thrive and experience prosperity," McKeever said.

SACOG officials seek to learn the needs of rural areas so the regional organization can serve as an advocate, he said.

El Dorado County did not participate in the Blueprint workshops held in 2003 and 2004 because it was still developing its general plan. But McKeever said the SACOG staff worked with the county to make sure its long-term land-use plan was reflected in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

The focus is on developing an employment base that will allow the county to balance jobs and housing, he said.

Reducing commute traffic would help reduce automobile-related air pollution, a key consideration in the transportation plan.

"Air quality regulations are getting tighter," McKeever told the commission.

SACOG is "sweating bullets," he said, to come up with a Metropolitan Transportation Plan that can meet federal air quality standards.

Because of changes in the federal standards, the Sacramento metropolitan region doesn't anticipate being able to attain those standards until 2018.

In addition, McKeever said, cities and counties will be affected by new state initiatives to reduce greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney, who represents the county on the Transportation Commission, said he was concerned how analyses of greenhouse gas emissions in the environmental review process would affect transportation projects.

"I'd like not to see some of the real important projects get held up," he said.

McKeever said SACOG officials were pleased that the draft Metropolitan Transportation Plan did not trigger a letter from the state Attorney General's Office regarding carbon emissions. Other agencies have received letters warning them to consider how long-term land use and transportation plans would affect climate change.

SACOG views that as acceptance by the attorney general "that we are doing a good job," McKeever said.