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### **Addressing Transportation Needs in Merced County**

Addressing the transportation needs of a growing population is an ongoing challenge for the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG). As a region that has historically relied heavily on our local highways and roadways to get people and goods from here to there, it has been our responsibility as a regional transportation agency to also look for solutions that include a multi-modal approach to the transportation demand. While there has been increased focus statewide in the last few years on the importance of providing residents with more transportation choices, MCAG has been at it for more than a decade.

In 2003, MCAG collaborated with federal and state agencies as part of the Partnership for Integrated Planning – then, a new program to engage resource agencies, local governments and community residents in the transportation planning process to develop a plan to guide future decision making and transportation investments in the region. Throughout this two year process, MCAG hosted 98 public meetings with a broad range of community based organizations, advocacy groups and residents. The result was a community-driven visioning, goal setting and scenario development process that ultimately identified a preferred scenario that aimed to relieve congestion, maintain roads, preserve ag land and protect the environment. This scenario included building many road improvements and meeting maintenance needs, while also expanding transit service and bicycle options.

Over the last ten years, MCAG has remained committed to these priorities, despite an economic recession and without a transportation sales tax measure. We've simply had to learn how to do more with less. We continue to invest in a multi-modal approach to the growing transportation demand, as is reflected by our expanded transit, bicycle, and rail programs, in addition to our highway improvement priorities.

The Bus, the transit operator in Merced County, recently celebrated the one year anniversary of a total redesign of the transit system which included expanding services to evenings and Sundays. In addition, The Bus utilizes technology to regularly review and improve efficiencies in service and to provide riders with easy to access information about routes and schedules. Riders can use [www.thebuslive.com](http://www.thebuslive.com) to locate buses in service, view routes and schedules and get up to the second arrival update predictions for buses at any particular stop.

Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS) is a multi-county, fixed-route public transit system that has been providing tourists and local residents an alternative to driving to the Yosemite region for nearly 15 years. It provides bus service into Yosemite National Park and gateway communities from Merced, Mariposa and Mammoth Lakes. Last month, YARTS celebrated its one millionth rider and is currently working on expanding service to include routes from Fresno ([www.yarts.com](http://www.yarts.com)).

As it became clear that the state and the public wanted better walking and biking facilities and connections, local and regional leaders responded. Over the years, MCAG has funded and supported many active transportation projects throughout the county. Whether it's sidewalks in downtown Livingston or traffic calming at the Planada Elementary School, MCAG has remained committed to helping provide safe and realistic alternatives for cyclists and pedestrians. Towards that end, \$110 million is dedicated to future active transportation and air quality projects in the 2014-2040 Regional Transportation Plan.

Through the work of a multi-agency partnership in the Central Valley, rail services are becoming a more viable option for commuters in the region. While the region has been served by Amtrak for decades, a recent proposed change to service will provide Merced commuters the opportunity to use Amtrak while traveling north or south for work. In addition, long term commuter rail projects like the Altamont Commuter Express expansion plans to Merced and the future high speed rail station round out a comprehensive strategy for providing future alternatives to travelers who are currently using their cars.

Together, these projects and investments showcase a decade-long commitment to developing a multi-modal, integrated transportation system for the movement of goods and people throughout Merced County. This is a long-standing commitment that continues to drive the work we do to provide the citizens of Merced County with safe and reliable transportation options into the future.

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