

Merced County businesses speaking with 'One Voice'

Business delegation focuses on economic development, infrastructure improvement

A delegation of Merced County business and government leaders are speaking as one in a campaign they hope will bring much-needed dollars to shore up county infrastructure and foster economic opportunities for its residents.

The county's One Voice delegation of some 20 county leaders, including Gustine City Council member Joe Oliveira, spent two days in Sacramento where they met with elected officials and high-ranking staff members to bring attention to the needs of Merced County.

The group, Oliveira explained, emphasizes the importance of projects and initiatives of importance to the county as a whole - such as planned improvements to Highway 99 - but also brings benefit to individual communities such as Gustine.

By having its voice heard, Oliveira pointed out, Merced County can improve its chances of getting projects and programs funded.

"Basically, we will be fighting Los Angeles and San Francisco again for this money," he

stated. "It seems like that is where it all goes, but if we could take a couple million dollars that Los Angeles would never miss, it would make a big difference in Merced County."

The top priorities the One Voice group took to Sacramento included:

The need for improvements to Highway 99

"That is our biggest push, our No. 1 priority," Oliveira said. "Merced County is the last one with intersections still going across Highway 99. That highway is the heart of the state. Everything runs north and south, and more commodities probably go down 99 than on I-5."

Economic development

"We would like to see money set aside so cities could go in and get a loan to do things like develop industrial parks," commented Oliveira. "In Gustine, we had businesses take a look but if they don't have a site ready where they can move in, they'll go somewhere else. Time is money."

The county would also like to see its economic development corporation establish a support network to help small businesses thrive.

"The opportunities are there, and people are willing to try them," Oliveira pointed out. "With some help and some education, more and more of those small businesses will be able to make it."

Prevailing wages

Oliveira said the group would like to see a new prevailing wage established for Central Valley counties. "We do not think our prevailing wage should be tied to San Francisco or Los Angeles," he said. "A lot of projects in the valley are lost because of the prevailing wages that have to be paid."

The One Voice delegation also touched on water, wastewater and school facility funding issues during its two-day trip.

This marked the second year a Merced County group has visited Sacramento.

Last year was a learning experience, Oliveira

said, and this year's campaign was more focused.

The group had access to top decision-makers in the state, he noted, including a nearly two-hour meeting with three members of the governor's cabinet, including Business, Transportation and Housing Secretary Sunne Wright McPeak, Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary A. G. Kawamura and Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Victoria Bradshaw.

"We had fewer meetings this year, but they were actually more productive," Oliveira said. "We came back with more than we thought we would. They are getting to know us, and they are telling us that we are doing the right thing by going to meet with people face-to-face and by being united in what we are asking for. You have to make your voice heard, and you can't go and send mixed messages."

The One Voice delegation will travel to Washington, D.C., in the future to make presentations to federal lawmakers and staffers.