

# Oliveira, 'One Voice' group lobbies for Merced County projects

GUSTINE - City Council member Joe Oliveira joined a delegation of Merced County leaders taking a wish list of county projects to the national halls of power in late March.

Oliveira, for the second year, joined the county's "One Voice" group which traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby elected officials and high-ranking staff members for funding of county projects.

The delegation, in a whirlwind schedule of two dozen meetings in four days, promoted improvements to the Highway 99 corridor as its top priority, Oliveira said, but also pushed for funding in support of the Los Banos bypass, an infrastructure bank and small business training.

Highlights of the trip, Oliveira said, included face-to-face meetings with California senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer.

"They were both very receptive, and very informed," he commented. "I know that Feinstein asked for our materials before we got there. When she walked into the room, she knew what our priorities were, and questioned us to make sure we were

all in agreement."

Both senators, Oliveira added, were supportive of the county's projects - although the benefits of the Washington, D.C., trip will not be known for several months.

"We felt it was more productive than last year's trip, but only time will tell. Hopefully the fruits will come back to us toward the end of the year," he commented.

Last year, Oliveira said, the One Voice delegation secured \$12 million for a variety of county projects.

Oliveira said the group was successful in impressing upon high-ranking officials the economic plight of Merced County. With its low incomes and double-digit unemployment, he said, the county shares many economic similarities with the notoriously impoverished Appalachia region of the nation.

His personal priorities, Oliveira said, address those issues.

He is a supporter of both the infrastructure bank, which would provide funding to create business parks to attract employers, and of the small business support services aimed at helping

entrepreneurs not only survive but thrive.

"We have to jump in to small business and economic development. Merced County has lost businesses because there are no sites ready to move into," he commented. "You can take somebody out and show them a 10-acre parcel of land, but what they want is a building sitting there ready for them to occupy."

Providing support for small businesses is equally important, Oliveira believes.

"Small business will be Merced County's top job generator in the future," he said. "There are a lot of people with good ideas, but without the expertise to stay in business long enough to make a go of it."

Oliveira said he believes the trip, sponsored by the city of Gustine, was well worthwhile.

"Everybody has told us that you have to go to Washington to promote your projects, or nothing will happen," he pointed out. "I think we will definitely be going again next year, and we would like to expand the delegation. We want to get more representation from the West Side, and the more diverse the group the better."