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News Briefs

Speak Up – We'll Listen!

Would you like a chance to voice your opinion on issues affecting our communities – and be able to do it every month? MCAG is currently looking for three people to join its Citizens Advisory Committee. There are openings for someone in the financial industry for a student of high school age or older. This is a great opportunity to see "behind the scenes" of community issues and to make

April 15, 2008

Elected Officials Gather for First MCAG Congress

On the last Saturday in March, 16 of the 37 elected officials in Merced County gathered to discuss issues that they face and to build better relationships with each other. The day-long meeting was held at Foster Farms in Livingston.

Although giving up a Saturday wasn't easy, the elected officials enjoyed the discussion enough to recommend that they hold a Congress quarterly to work together on some of the regional issues facing all cities and the county. The next Congress will be held May 8th in Los Banos, from 3:00-6:00 p.m.

A professional facilitator led the group through some opening exercises to help participants define their common purpose. Following that, open and frank discussion led to some key themes.

The first theme dealt with thinking regionally and one meeting attendee commented, "If we don't think regionally, we'll get run over." The group agreed that other regions of the state will define our future for us unless we decide what we want and then stand united to realize that vision.

A second theme dealt with the fact that we are a "can do" county. No one will do what we need for us; we have to take ownership and do it ourselves.

Another discussion centered around the need to support our main industry, agriculture, while attracting a more diversified economy, with jobs that would keep college graduates in Merced County instead of sending them elsewhere to work.

Towards the end of the day, a list of topics was developed, showing projects and issues that the cities and the county could work on together.



One Voice Delegates Finalize Agenda for Washington, D.C. Visit

The Merced County Association of Governments will take 27 delegates to Washington, D.C. on April 21-23, in an effort to bring more funding to the area for projects ranging from

decisions that truly influence quality of life in Merced County.

If you would like to be a part of this Citizens Committee, contact Lori Flanders at 723-3153, ext. 318.

Spin the Recycling Wheel

MCAG's annual visits to community fairs and festivals began last weekend with the Winton Spring Festival. Children and adults are invited to spin the Recycling Wheel, answer a question about recycling, and win a prize. MCAG staff will be on hand to also explain about the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint project.

Future event dates:

Apr. 19 – UC Merced – Earth Day
Apr. 24 – Delhi Information Night
Apr. 30-May 4 – Los Banos Spring Fair
May 10 – Planada Community Day

Blueprint Executive Forum

The regional Blueprint – a project in which all eight counties in the San Joaquin Valley will develop a common vision and steps to reach that vision – will host an Executive Forum for elected officials on Friday, Apr. 15, 10:00-2:30 in Fresno. The Blueprint is now in its second year and general future scenarios have been developed, which will be presented to the public in Aug.-Oct. 2008.

The Forum is a chance for local elected officials to ask tough questions about the Blueprint and have a discussion about how the Valley's critical issues will affect the Blueprint and how the Blueprint will affect future planning.

We Have a New Website

MCAG launched a new website in March that not only reflects its new logo and

Transportation to healthcare, water, economic development, and education. This is eight more than went last year and over twice as many who visited DC when the One Voice program began four years ago.

The group spent the previous months narrowing down a long list of potential issues and projects to 10 that they will present. Those projects are:

- \$4 million to help purchase right-of-way to build the Campus Parkway
- \$5 million to complete engineering and design for the Los Banos bypass
- \$3 million for study and planning for the Westside Drainage project, which affects 100,000 acres of farmland on the west side of Merced and Fresno Counties
- \$400,000 to establish an Engineering Academy for high school students
- \$420,000 to expand an Environmental Science summer program to more high schools
- a request that federal grant program requirements for entrepreneurs be expanded to include more candidates
- support for Congressman Cardoza's bill to establish a comprehensive water plan for the San Joaquin Valley
- a request that Merced County's Health Professional Shortage Area designation be reinstated so that the area can attract more health care professionals
- a request that Medicare reimbursements be distributed equitably

The One Voice group has brought or helped to bring nearly \$11 million to Merced County for a variety of projects. Last year the group was successful in securing an earmark for the Los Banos bypass, and in requesting the language in a transportation bill be changed so that money for a new interchange near Hilmar could be used to study a bypass around the community. While this was the original idea for the project, the bill was written in a way that prevented the funds to be used as intended.

For more information on One Voice, contact Candice Steelman at (209) 723-3153, ext. 308 or go to www.mcagov.org.

Public Comments Show Support for New Atwater-Merced Expressway

On April 14, over 40 people attended a public hearing on the proposed Atwater-Merced Expressway (AME). The hearing was part of a 60-day public review process on the project's Environmental Impact Report (EIR), which closes at the end of April.

"The comments were very supportive," according to Jesse Brown, MCAG's Executive Director. "People recognized the need to improve transportation access to Castle Airport and to the northern part of Merced."

In addition to accessing Castle Airport, the AME will provide additional north-south capacity to serve existing and planned developments, and will reduce deficiencies on Highway 99 by closing the Buhach Road interchange and constructing a new Hwy 99/AME interchange.

The project began in 1997 by identifying a funding source. To date, funds generated by new

colors, but is more user-friendly. The website gives information about regional road projects, San Joaquin Valley Blueprint project, and One Voice legislative program, as well as providing links to a number of valuable sites, such as GIS interactive maps, transit, and bicycling.

development, through MCAG's Regional Transportation Impact Fee, have paid for the study report and EIR, both required for any new regional road project.

Initially, seven alternative routes were selected as possibilities. Further analysis and public comment narrowed the route choices to two.

"MCAG and our consultants will look at this some more, take into consideration the public comments, and submit a final draft EIR to our Governing Board in August for certification as to its completeness and selection of the final project alignment," says Brown.

Unfortunately, he explained, no funding source has been identified for the next step, which is project design and engineering. "We're very pleased to report that the first two steps came in sooner than expected and under budget, but now we're at a standstill until we can find the money to continue."

Brown explained that completing the first steps helps MCAG to be prepared should any opportunities open up at the state or federal level, and fast action is required to secure those funds.

MCAG Celebrates Completion of Mission Interchange Project

Despite a sudden wind, over 40 people attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday, Apr. 14 for the Highway 99 Mission Interchange project in Merced. The event was held at the intersection of Mission and Coffee Roads, near the highway.

The project converted two miles of Hwy 99 from a 4-lane expressway to a 6-lane freeway, even though the road will continue to be striped for four lanes until more 6-lane projects along the highway can be connected. The project also constructed a frontage road and new interchange at Mission Avenue, with a crossing over the railroad tracks to the west.

Featured speakers included Will Kempton, Director of Caltrans, County Supervisor Kathleen Crookham, and Merced Council Member Bill Spriggs. Congressman Dennis Cardoza, State Senator Jeff Denham, and State Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani sent representatives with certificates of congratulations.



Merced City Councilman Bill Spriggs, County Supervisor Kathleen Crookham, Caltrans Director Will Kempton, Caltrans District 10 Director Kome Ajise, MCAG Executive Director Jesse Brown (in hat), and reps from Congressman Cardoza, State Senator Jeff Denham, and Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani cut the ribbon for the new Mission Interchange on Highway 99 in Merced.



Several of those present struggled to hold the Caltrans tent down as winds suddenly picked up and whipped through the area. One TV crewman walked away from his camera for only a moment, then watched as camera and tripod toppled over.

How Do You Count the Homeless? Why Do You Count the Homeless?

While attempts have been made in the past to actually go to places where the homeless might be found and take a nose count, this year MCAG, and the Continuum of Care Collaborative tried a different process. They asked the homeless to participate in interviews.

Teams of five volunteers went to churches and agencies that provide services to the homeless. They set up a table and asked homeless individuals to participate.

There are an estimated 2,641 homeless people in Merced County, with 38% chronically homeless, largely due to mental health or substance abuse issues. More than half of the homeless are 36-50 years old. 10% were employed at one time. 75% have been in jail at some point in their lives. 64% have no income at all.

"The purpose of the interviews was to discover gaps in service," explains Lori Flanders, program specialist at MCAG and coordinator of the Continuum of Care program.

Those gaps include lack of affordable housing, and lack of health care. The survey results will be



brought to the Continuum of Care, an association of service organizations, which is funded by the City of Merced and Merced County. As one step in addressing the lack of accessible health care, Golden Valley Health Center recently launched a mobile clinic to serve the homeless.

As an association of governments, MCAG writes grant requests on behalf of the six cities and county. Each year, MCAG's Continuum of Care is eligible to compete for up to \$600,000 in homeless assistance funding

Two projects that the service group has launched are providing a four-bed facility for mentally ill, chronically homeless adults, and establishing a computer based tracking and referral system for homeless assistance agencies.

MCAG holds monthly meetings to discuss homeless issues, establish goals, and measure achievements. If you are interested in joining the Continuum of Care, please contact Lori Flanders at lori.flanders@mcagov.org or 209-723-3153 ext 318,

Getting to Know You: Chairman Mike Nelson

Each year, the Chairmanship of the MCAG Governing Board rotates, alternating between a city elected official and one from the county. This year's Chairman is Mike Nelson, County Supervisor for District 3, representing Atwater, McSwain, Franklin-Beachwood and North Merced on the Merced County Board of Supervisors.



Chairman Nelson is a lifelong resident of the San Joaquin Valley and grew up just to the north in Modesto, where his parents instilled in him the importance of giving back to the community.

Chairman Nelson graduated from Modesto High School and later earned his degree in Agricultural Science from California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

After graduating from college, Chairman Nelson put his degree to good use and worked in farm management for 13 years. First, with Tenneco West, a Fortune 500 company and later for J. R. Wood, Inc. in Atwater. He was a volunteer firefighter for Merced County/California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection before becoming a full-time career firefighter in Atwater. Understanding the importance of community service, he was elected to serve on the Atwater Elementary School District Board of Trustees in 1997, an experience that would lead him to his current position today.

When asked why did he decide to run for county supervisor? "Divine inspiration," he smiles. Chairman Nelson says that he faces a number of significant daily challenges but his greatest challenge is "dealing with the push from various interest groups who expect outcomes that solely benefit them." He continues, "Many times we have very similar goals but approach

issues incorrectly. It's nice when we can all check our egos at the door and work together."

For many people, Chairman Nelson believes that government is difficult to understand, which is why he appreciates all efforts to make it more transparent and less complex for the public.

Merced County is changing rapidly and is expected to change even more so in the coming years. Chairman Nelson realizes there is often adversity to change and cautions, "Just saying you don't want to change isn't helpful, without offering some solutions. If we work together, we can change for the better, while keeping our charm and maintaining our community identity."

Chairman Nelson believes that MCAG is making great strides towards thinking regionally. "The Central Valley recently partnered with the Bay Area on Proposition 1B funding, which was the only way we could keep Southern California from getting a disproportionate share. We're working with the other seven counties in the Valley on the Regional Blueprint. And recently all eight Councils of Government in the Valley made our first combined visit to legislators in Sacramento."

Chairman Nelson and his wife Sylvia, the Principal at Elmer Wood Elementary School in Atwater, have two children. Sarah is a graduate of California State University Stanislaus and Matt is a junior at UC Merced, studying mechanical engineering.

Decisions Made in March, To Be Made in May

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board, members:

- Authorized the Solid Waste Division to respond to Total Waste Systems, Inc.'s request for information regarding options for the importation of waste from Mariposa County to Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Solid Waste Facilities, with the anticipation that this will be a revenue generating activity for the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Solid Waste Enterprise.

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County, members authorized:

- Award of purchase order to Removable Media Solutions, Inc. for a video surveillance system for the Merced County transit yard and bus shop and approve submittal of a grant application to the Governor's Office of Homeland Security's California Transit Security Grant Program.
- Assignment of the Contracted Operator Agreement (Merced County Contract No. 2005132) from Laidlaw Transit Services, Inc. to First Transit Services, Inc.
- Federal Transit Administration Grant Application for Merced County Transit Rural Operating Expenses 2007/08

As the MCAG Governing Board, members:

- Accepted the Regional Transportation Impact Fee Program Audit of Imposition and Collection of Fees

- Approved the addition of an interview component to the Citizens Advisory Committee application process with interviews to take place via a subcommittee of five Directors who will then report back to the Governing Board for the appointment of the newly selected CAC member
- Authorized submittal of a \$92,994.60 Grant Application to the Transit Security Grant Program for installation of a video surveillance system for the Merced County Transit Yard and Bus Shop

The April 17 meeting was cancelled. The Board will meet on May 15, 3:00 p.m. at the Merced County Board of Supervisors chambers.

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