



In This Issue

[News Briefs](#)

[New Bridges to Yosemite Open on Highway 140](#)

[A Car-less Commute? Cool!](#)

[MCAG Director Kathleen Crookham Exemplifies Spirit of Merced County](#)

[Supervisor Nelson Hands MCAG Chair to Gustine Council Member Joe Oliveira](#)

[Merced County/Cities Consider Vehicle Abatement Program](#)

[Learn More About Recycling, Blueprint at County Fair](#)

[Governing Board Decisions Made in June; Decisions To Be Made in July](#)

News Briefs

MCAG Holds Public Workshop July 31 for Atwater-Merced Expressway

On Thursday, July 31, from 10:00 a.m. to noon at the Merced Civic Center, MCAG will hold a public workshop to review the project and the Environmental Impact Report

July 16, 2008

New Bridges to Yosemite Open on Highway 140



It's likely that a collective sigh of relief was heard all the way to Livingston when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger cut the ribbon June 27th on the new "Essential Access Interim Bridge Project" on Hwy 140 in Mariposa County. Twenty-five months after a rockslide closed the highway and caused two temporary detour bridges to be built, a second set of bridges opened for use by full-sized vehicles (up to 45-foot buses).



A 45-foot YARTS bus was the lead vehicle in a small parade of large vehicles that crossed the bridge to note the opening following the ribbon cutting.

No group was any happier about the new larger bridges than the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS), which is managed by MCAG on behalf of the YARTS Joint Power Agreement between Merced, Mono, and Mariposa counties. YARTS had traditionally used 40-foot buses that carried 47 or more passengers. The restrictions had cut the bus sizes and with it the capacity of those buses to 26 passengers. The YARTS capacity was cut nearly in half, but not its expenses.

A YARTS bus leads the parade across the new bridge, after Governor Schwarzenegger cuts the ribbon. The old bridge appears at the right.

Returning to the full-size buses was a blessing according to Dick Whittington, YARTS Transit Manager. "The last two

years have been a real challenge for YARTS," Whittington said. "We have worked very hard to keep the service vital, performing the task we are charged with. Being able to return to our full sized buses will allow us to begin to grow the system again. With gas prices being what they are, the timing of this improvement is fantastic! This is definitely the right time to use transit to get to Yosemite."

The initial bridges restricted vehicles to 28 feet overall, which excluded tour buses, some school buses, construction vehicles, larger fire engines, delivery trucks and YARTS buses.

The three month full closure after the rockslide and the nearly two years of restrictive bridges harmed Mariposa County's economy (and Merced's as well), so the prospect of the return of tour buses and full-sized RVs was welcome news to all who rely on the highway traveler for their income.

"We want everyone in the world to know that Mariposa County is open for business," said Schwarzenegger during ceremonies prior to the ribbon cutting.

(EIR) for the proposed Atwater-Merced Expressway (AME). The final EIR will be published on Aug. 1. On Aug. 21, the MCAG Governing Board will select a preferred alignment and consider approval of the EIR Certification.

This project has been funded through new development fees. It will improve access to Castle Airport and create additional north-south capacity to serve existing and planned developments. The AME will reduce deficiencies on Highway 99 by closing the Buhach Road interchange and constructing a new interchange.

Fun Fact!

On Oct. 7, 2004, MCAG installed solar panels on its roof, thanks to a grant from PG&E. Since that time, we have saved \$42,944.33 in energy costs.

Not So Fun Fact . . .

If Proposition 1B funds remain in the State budget for cities and counties, Merced County will receive \$575.59 per mile -- and Orange County will receive \$17,119.65 per mile. The formula is based on population and number of registered vehicles.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir/Madam,

I'm planning a trip to the United States and contacted you by E-mail to receive information about the [YARTS] lines to Yosemite Park. I must say that I've contacted other transportation companies and your company was the only one who has answered with such kindness and helpful information.

Will Kempton, Director of the CA. Dept. of Transportation (Caltrans), noted that Teichert Construction had completed the project ahead of schedule and within budget.

A Car-less Commute? Cool!

"Tell me about the olden days," my grandkids asked. "Well," I recalled fondly, "that was when the gallon meter at the gas pump turned faster than the dollar meter."

Of course, my very young grandchildren had no idea what I was talking about. And they didn't understand my sudden excitement when I found a way to reverse the current trend of dollar meter spinning at a dizzying rate, faster and faster than the gallon meter.

I had discovered Car-less Commute! Run by THE BUS, Car-less Commute brings commuters into Merced from various locations – Los Banos, Atwater, Delhi, Livingston, even Turlock, which is where I hop on.

My first day, I was greeted by another passenger and the friendly bus driver. As we picked up commuters in Delhi and Livingston, they all seemed to know each other's names. People could talk with other riders, look out the window or read a novel, like I did. At a central location in Merced, I switched to a smaller bus that took me right to the door of my work place. That evening, a bus picked me up at 5:10, I switched to my Turlock bus at the Transpo Center, and enjoyed the ride back home.

Overall, the trip added a half hour to my car commute, but the savings – wow! The \$290 I was spending on gas for my car was suddenly reduced to a \$30 monthly pass. And I didn't have to fight traffic, plus I had time to myself to read.

There are currently 450 riders on 15 routes. The program also offers a guaranteed ride home for personal emergencies, such as a sick child.

The Car-less Commute program is financed with a combination of Federal Transit grants, state transit assistance funding, fares and local transportation funds. For more information, call THE BUS at 385-7600 and ask for Janet Kasper or email Janet at jkasper@co.merced.ca.us.

MCAG Director Kathleen Crookham Exemplifies Spirit of Merced County

To many, MCAG Director and County Supervisor Kathleen Crookham is the epitome of the Merced spirit. She was born in Merced to a family with a long history in the area, graduated from local schools, went on to earn two college degrees at a time when it wasn't popular for women to do so, became one of the first female school principals, ran for office and served in that capacity for 12 years.

"I always felt so lucky to have a nice family history," she says. Her father's parents came from Ireland in 1880 and bought property in east Merced, with is still held by the



Ms. Robin Lamas replied quickly to my E-mails and was very helpful. I felt that I can approach her with any question that I have and she made my trip's arrangements much easier.

I was very impressed by the kind service and looking for my trip in Yosemite Park with YARTS.

Regards,

Anat Amely, Israel

family. Kathleen and her sister still operate the cattle ranch. Her mother's parents are also from Ireland. They lived for some time in Ohio before coming to Merced in 1910.

Kathleen went to high school in Le Grand, then earned a Bachelor's degree in education from Fresno State, after her father told her and her sister that they weren't to rely on a man to take care of them and they should be ready to earn their own way. Later, she received a Master's degree in school administration from Chapman University.

During that time she married, but continued to work towards her degree. Following graduation, she taught in Merced Schools and eventually became a principal, a position she held for 21 years. During her administration at Hoover, the school won the California Distinguished School award not once, but three times.

When she retired, she decided to run for office, "much to the chagrin of my kids, who said why would you do that when everything about your life is looked at through a microscope?" she laughs. She says her school experience gave her background on organizational structure. And, "I'm sure many of my former students helped put me in office through their votes."

Now, she says, it's time to do "the third chapter of my life," which involves playing more with her five grandchildren and more traveling. And, of course, more service as she is currently looking at committees that interest her and where her experience would be helpful.

"I just love Merced. It has so much potential," Kathleen says enthusiastically.

One of the biggest challenges she sees for the other MCAG directors is helping the public evaluate all transportation options available to them and consider alternative methods for getting from one place to another. The San Joaquin Valley regional Blueprint process is another large and positive program led by MCAG.

Kathleen is glad to see the progress that's been made at the state and federal levels to recognize Merced County. "It's always bothered me that Merced County has been at the tail end, especially when we see progress being made in the Valley from the north to our county, then south of our boundaries, but skipping us.

"The Central Valley is often called the 'other California'. We need to stick together so we don't become the Appalachia of California."

She appreciates the MCAG members (cities and county) working relationship in getting people to come to the table to discuss issues. "Interagency needs don't stop at a jurisdictional line."

Two of Kathleen's three children live in the area. Her daughter is a counselor at Golden Valley high school, her oldest son works for Morningstar Foods, and her youngest son teaches ag mechanics in Exeter.

Her wish for the future? "I hope I live long enough to see these dreams become reality. There are wonderful things on the horizon!"

Supervisor Nelson Hands MCAG Chair to Gustine Council Member Joe Oliveira

Each year the Chair of the MCAG Governing Board switches between the cities and the county districts. Starting with the July 17 meeting, Gustine Council Member Joe Oliveira will replace County Supervisor Mike Nelson as Chair.

During his tenure, Mike worked on unifying city and county interests, with joint themes of communication and collaboration.

"If we don't work together, we'll have jurisdictional issues. If we don't get everyone engaged in the discussion, we'll hear complaints. I'd like to avoid that by communicating with each other more often," explains Mike.

Joe adds that trying to achieve consensus among city council members, mayors, county supervisors, agencies, and community groups is "like herding cats", but, with persistence, you eventually get there.

"Cities and counties have different roles and responsibilities. We're not going to agree on everything," says Joe, "and, really, that's good. It brings different perspectives to the table."

Joe plans to continue the extra communication efforts that Mike put into the role as Chair, personally meeting with all MCAG Governing Board Directors during the year and attending as many city managers meetings as time will allow him.

The 11-member MCAG Governing Board includes a supervisor from each of the five county districts and an elected official from each of the six incorporated cities located within the political boundary of Merced County. Through a Joint Powers Authority, this Board is able to make decisions regarding regional transportation, transit (THE BUS), and solid waste, as well as other programs of regional interest.

Merced County/Cities Consider Vehicle Abatement Program

Merced County and its cities are considering adopting a Vehicle Abatement program. The program is designed to remove abandoned vehicles that pose a hazard or public nuisance. Over 4,000 abandoned vehicles are currently located throughout Merced County.

Section 22710 of the California Vehicle Code (CVC) allows counties to form a Service Authority for the "abatement, removal, or disposal as a public nuisance of any abandoned, wrecked, dismantled, or inoperative vehicle ... from private or public property". Section 22710 allows for the imposition of an annual one-dollar (\$1.00) vehicle registration fee on all vehicles registered in Merced County and its cities.

Merced City approved the program. The other five cities and the county are considering adoption. Over half the counties in California have this program.

To begin collection of the fees, participating the cities and the county must adopt an ordinance that requires very specific language. Copies of the ordinances must be submitted to the California Highway Patrol by Aug. 1, so those jurisdictions that need to modify their ordinance will have to do so in July.

According to MCAG Grants Manager Anna Fuentes, who drafted the program report, "It is anticipated that the cities and county will have access to about \$170,000 annually. Half the funds will be available based on the percentage of vehicles each jurisdiction abated, out of the total abated countywide."

In addition, 40% of the total funds generated would be allocated based on each jurisdiction's population, and 10%, would be shared evenly by all seven jurisdictions.



Learn More About Recycling, Blueprint at Merced County Fair

During Spring and Summer, you can often see an MCAG booth at community events. And "manning" the booths are MCAG Recycling Specialist Jenny Halpin and Assistant Planner Lori Flanders.

This week you'll find them at the Merced County Fair. Fairgoers can spin the recycling wheel, answer a question, and receive an item to remind them to recycle. Jenny can answer many questions, ranging from

where to take hazardous waste to information on fluorescent tubes or what goes in the blue garbage can.

Lori will inform fairgoers about the massive Blueprint planning process underway among the eight San Joaquin Valley counties, a plan that will affect Merced County residents through 2050. Often she has an aerial map of the area, where people can find and mark their house.

For more information on recycling or Blueprint, go to www.mcagov.org.

Governing Board Decisions of June 19; Decisions To Be Made on July 17, 2008

In June, MCAG Directors made the following decisions –

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board:
(No items this month)

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County:
(No items this month)

As the MCAG Governing Board:

- Authorized the Call Box agreement with Comarco Wireless Technologies; Case Systems, Inc.; and Merced County Safe
- Approved the 2008/09 Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Plan.

- Adopted the Regional Housing Needs Authority methodology and housing allocations to jurisdictions
- Instructed staff to send information about the proposed Abandoned Vehicle Abatement program to the cities and county for their approval
- Supported California's Principles for the new federal transportation act
- Approved sending a support letter for AB 3021 (Nava) to create a California Transportation Finance Authority
- Appointed Adam Cox as the student representative to the MCAG Citizens Advisory Committee and reappointed Richard Jantz as the Economic Development representative
- Accepted the 2002-2005 Transit System Performance Audit
- Authorized the MCAG Executive Director to execute an agreement for legal services with the Law Office of Thomas H. Terpstra for the Atwater-Merced Expressway Project in an amount not to exceed \$40,000

In July, the Directors will consider the following items --

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board:

- Recommend that a public hearing be set for Aug. 21, 2008 to consider adopting the Revised Solid Waste Facility Fee Schedule
- Authorize termination of a lease-to-farm agreement with Jean Pierre Sagouspe, III, at his request
- Recommend candidates for the Integrated Waste Management Local Task Force in the categories of city citizen-at-large and county citizen-at-large

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County:

- Authorize a new 5-year lease with the City of Merced for common area at the transportation center
- Approve the 2008/09 Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Plan and goal

As the MCAG Governing Board:

- Approve a letter of support for AB 3034 (Galgiani) – High Speed Rail Bond Act
- Approve a letter of support for the proposed UC Merced Medical School
- Approve a letter of support for AB 2188 (Arambula) – Community Development Block Grants
- Approve the program concept for the San Joaquin Valley National Agricultural Goods Movement and Trade Corridor Program
- Adopt the final draft of the 2009 Interim Federal Transportation Improvement Program by resolution
- Approve the MCAG compensation study and the recommendations for Exempt/Non-Exempt designations

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