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## News Briefs

### AME Public Comments Deadline Nears; Open Meeting Held Dec. 16 in Atwater

Public comments on the recirculated draft of the Environmental Impact Report for the Atwater-Merced Expressway will be accepted until Jan. 5, 2009. The draft EIR is available online at [www.mcagov.org](http://www.mcagov.org) or you may request a copy on a CD by calling (209) 723-3153. Paper copies are available for viewing at the MCAG office or the main branch of the Merced County Library.

A public meeting will be held from 6:00-8:00 p.m. at the Atwater Community Center, 760 E. Bellevue. Large scale project plans will be on display and staff will be on hand for questions and comments. Comments can be mailed to the MCAG office or emailed to [AMEcomments@mcagov.org](mailto:AMEcomments@mcagov.org).

The AME is a proposed 7 mile long road between SR59 at Bellevue and SR140 at Gurr, providing an alternate route to SR59, which travels through downtown Merced.

### Blueprint Summit to Review Proposed Valley-Wide Planning Scenario

A public summit to make final recommendations to the vision for the San Joaquin Valley will be held Jan. 26, 10:00-3:00, at the Fresno Convention Center. Cost is \$35 and registration forms can be found at [www.valleyblueprint.org](http://www.valleyblueprint.org).

This summit follows three years of public meetings in all 8 Valley counties. Over 10,000 people have participated in the Blueprint process.

### Congressman Cardoza Proposes 4.5% Rate for All Homeowners

### MCAG Governing Board Reconsiders Decision to Cut Saturday Bus Service

On Thursday, Dec. 18, the Transit Joint Powers Authority will reconsider its decision to cut Saturday service of THE BUS. To continue the service, reductions may be recommended elsewhere in the system.

In November the Transit JPA approved cuts to transit service, including eliminating Saturday service altogether. The decision came on the heels of yet another proposed cut in transit funding by state legislators. Earlier state budget cuts plus rising fuel costs left Merced County with a million dollar shortfall.

About 1,900 passengers ride THE BUS on Saturdays, with the majority of riders located in the larger cities.

As an alternative to cutting Saturday service, the Directors will consider suspending the Carless Commute program from Jan. 1 through June 30, 2009 or raising rates to meet the minimum requirements for farebox revenue. The suspension would affect 342 passengers, mostly commuters who pay \$30 a month to travel to and from work. If the rates are raised, some commuters could be paying over \$100, depending on trip length.

Carless Commute travels as far north as Turlock, bringing workers to various locations in Merced County.

After carefully looking at all options, transit service still needs to cut 2,854 service hours. For now, the MCAG Governing Board Directors will be asked to maintain Saturday service, but direct staff to monitor fuel costs. If service is restored, but fuel costs go up significantly, this issue may return.

### MCAG Leads Effort to Seek Foreclosure Relief Funds: State Dept. of Housing Awards \$7 Million



Photo courtesy of Gene Lieb/Los Banos Enterprise

When the federal Department of Housing (HUD) announced what areas would receive millions in foreclosure relief, Merced County and its cities were stunned to find they were not on the list. As one of the top three foreclosure spots in the nation, the county expected help from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NPS). Neighboring Stanislaus and Fresno counties received millions as did individual cities such as Modesto and Fresno.

Investigation by Congressman Dennis Cardoza's staff investigation showed that HUD used old data, giving Merced County a vacancy rate of less than 1%, when the true

numbers were three times that. There was no explanation as to why Merced City, with a population that met HUD's requirements for an "entitlement" city, did not receive anything.

Following media outcry and strongly-worded letters from the Congressman, as well as State Senator Jeff Denham and Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani, the State Dept. of Housing and Community Development announced three Q&A sessions on the NPS program, one in Merced.

The cities and the county, realizing that their request would be strengthened by presenting together rather than have each city and the county present their own case, asked MCAG to take the lead in pulling together a report and organizing speakers for the HCD meeting.

City, county, and MCAG staff pooled data and, in eight days, came up with a number of charts showing the Merced area as:

#1 in Foreclosure Rate – 12.6%  
#1 in Housing Price Drop – 40.55%  
#1 in Unemployment – 11.89%

Merced numbers were almost three times as high as many counties which received funding from HUD.

Also during that eight-day window, city, county, and MCAG Public Information Officers met to plan talking points and suggest spokespeople. Twin themes of "Our Fair Share" and "No Double Dipping" were selected. The latter message refers to cities and counties that already received a federal allocation not get more from the state until other needy areas received funds.

The statements and questions from each city and the county were wrapped up by MCAG Director and Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey who asked HCD staff, "Is there anything in your formula that would prevent Merced County from getting its fair share?" Her question brought gasps and chuckles from the audience and a half-smile from HCD personnel.

A week later, HCD announced its allocations, and Merced County and cities were pleased to see that a total of \$7 million had been allotted to this area. The next step is for Merced City and Los Banos to submit their own applications for the funds, with Atwater, Gustine, Dos Palos, Livingston, and Merced County submitting a joint application.

Over the next year, some of monies given to states from HUD will be returned as states, cities, and counties find themselves unable to use their allotment in the time and manner prescribed by the grant program. At that time, MCAG will work with the cities and county to present our need for more funds.

### Los Banos Bypass Moves Forward Despite Tremendous Obstacles

For over 40 years, the residents of Los Banos have been asking for a bypass road around the city. Now that the town is nearing gridlock during commute hours, all parties involved have stepped up compromise and collaboration.

The biggest sticking point has been the cost. At one point estimates rose to \$570 million. That was for a true freeway, with elevated on and off ramps, and no signals. But last year a compromise was

December 15, 2008

Congressman Dennis Cardoza expressed strong support for a plan being considered by the Treasury Department that would allow homeowners in foreclosure to obtain a 30-year mortgage at a 4.5 percent fixed rate. Congressman Cardoza, whose district has the highest foreclosure rates in the country, further demanded the Treasury Department immediately look into expanding this program to all American homeowners.

"By lowering the monthly payments, we will essentially be giving each homeowner a stimulus check by putting more money in their pocket and without placing a burden on the Treasury or the taxpayer," Congressman Cardoza said.

### Recycling Events for Used Pesticide Containers

There are three more recycling opportunities for used pesticide containers:

Jan. 12, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.  
Wilbur Ellis Co.  
782 W. Washington Road, El Nido

Jan. 13, 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.  
Cortez Growers Association  
12714 Cortez Ave., Turlock

Jan. 14, 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.  
Mid-Valley Agricultural Services  
11019 Eucalyptus Ave., Livingston

The series of recycling events are sponsored by the Merced County Ag Commissioner's office.

Containers should be triple rinsed and should not have caked-on materials. Unacceptable containers will be returned. Review the Interstate Ag Plastics website checklist for container preparation: [www.interstateagplastics.com](http://www.interstateagplastics.com). Further information about recycling is available at [www.acrecycle.org](http://www.acrecycle.org) or the MCAG recycling site [www.mercedrecycles.org](http://www.mercedrecycles.org). For more information, call (209) 385-7431.

reached so that the project could be downscaled and built in three sections. Instead of a signal-free freeway, the bypass will be a flat road, with a few lights at crucial junctions.

Developer fees will provide \$2.3 million to purchase right of way for Phase 1. These fees are collected by cities and the county and then are deposited into a fund called Regional Transportation Impact Fee (RTIF), managed by MCAG. The Governing Board voted to spend part of the \$6 million collected so far on the bypass project.

The City of Los Banos continues to make hard decisions for the bypass project. The City Council recently voted to bond their wastewater treatment plant to secure funds for plant expansion and Phase 1 right-of-way purchase.

In March 2009, Caltrans will finish the Supplemental Environmental Document, which follows years of environmental studies and approval of the main Environmental Impact Report.

### MCAG Directory Johnny Mays Leads a Life of Adventure

What do Alabama, Russia, Merle Haggard, and church have in common? The answer: Johnny Mays, council member from Dos Palos and a Director on the MCAG Governing Board.

Johnny has a fascinating life story. Born in Russelville, Alabama, Johnny first came to California in 1962, prior to heading for Viet Nam. Four years later, he took up his dream to be a professional singer and musician. Johnny plays guitar, mandolin, and the piano. He had some success, a couple of records, and finished his singing career performing in the road show of famous country singer Merle Haggard. Then his life took a major turn.

"I discovered the Bible and received my call to the ministry," he explains. Johnny's ministry covered 39 nations in the past 35 years, with a majority of the time in Russia, England, and Thailand. During those travels, he and wife Judy had six children, 5 boys and a girl. Three are now correctional officers in California and Nevada and three are sales representatives.

Music has continued to be a part of Johnny's life, and he shares his talent on his KDPT (102.9 FM) radio shows.

"In 2005, while working in London with Russian asylum seekers, I received a call to come back to the USA and eventually to a small home missions church in Dos Palos (Valley Christian Center)," says Johnny.

Since coming to Dos Palos, a new chapter is being written in his life saga. Johnny had never been involved in public service, but thoroughly enjoys it. "One thing that surprised me was, when I hear, 'They' need to do something, I realized that we are the 'they'. So, not only am I one of those who is responsible for finding a solution, but bureaucracy is a massive beast, so I'm learning how to get a task through it and watching the pros."

As a council member, Johnny would like to adequately represent Dos Palos first to the region, taking "a more positive approach from what I've sensed has been an isolationist approach, having Dos Palos stay by itself. We have to help find solutions and then work for our fair share of the pie."

Johnny also appreciates being the Dos Palos representative to the MCAG Governing Board and participating in the One Voice program, which takes issues of regional interest to legislators in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

A recent personal project is a new book, available in January 2009 entitled "The Achilles Heel of God".

### MCAG GIS Dept. Hosts Annual "GIS Day" for Valley Counties and Cities

**TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS ON THE INTERNET AND PAVEMENT CONDITIONS**

**Project Description:**  
MCAG has added interactive access to our regional transportation projects through our Internet County. You can search for and get information about a project and/or zoom in to see where it might be built.

**GIS in action:**  
The public can access this info at [www.mcag.ca.gov](http://www.mcag.ca.gov). All of the data is contained by MDSIS and some of the project data is linked to PDF's also created using ArcGIS 9.2, ArcSDE 9.2, Oracle 10g.

**Project Description:**  
The project involves finding and evaluating future conditions of pavement throughout all Merced County. This is used by Public Works Department to make decisions about where to place the limited resources available for road maintenance.

**GIS in action:**  
GIS is used in conjunction with a pavement management system developed by MCAG. The data is used to make decisions for funding.

Partnering For Regional Solutions

It seems that there's a special calendar day for everything from hot dogs to cousins. One little known day highlights the importance of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in everyday life. Nov. 19 was the 10th anniversary of GIS Day.

The National Geographic Society has sponsored Geography Awareness Week since 1987 to promote geographic literacy in schools and communities. GIS Day is on Wednesday during GIS Week. During this time, GIS users demonstrate real world applications that make a difference in society. More than 80 countries held special events during GIS Week in November.

MCAG GIS, along with GIS departments in neighboring cities and counties on their special day to share information, demonstrate unique applications, and learn from experts. The day's events, held at Merced City hall, were hosted by MCAG.

"There was so much good information, it's hard to pick the day's highlights," says Rich Green, MCAG GIS manager. "The presentation by the advisor for the 4-H club peaked a lot of interest. A couple of the cities might get the 4-H youth involved in various types of data collection."

The 4-H youth have been learning GIS techniques for two years, especially applications for agriculture. GIS helps them realize how farming has changed. For example, with GIS units in tractors, farmers can make more precise turns. In another project, they inventoried garbage along Bear Creek.

Green has presented GIS concepts and applications to Merced College students in the past and hopes that, by having youth use the programs, it helps them consider GIS as a future career.

As part of the day's activities, over 50 maps were displayed in a gallery at the city hall. They will be on display through Dec. 15. Maps include displays of school redistricting, fire run books, bicycle plans, transportation projects, census maps, environmental layers, housing density maps, and the always-fascinating crime hot spots maps.

MCAG manages data development and distribution for all the cities and the county of Merced.

"What we have is unique," says Green. "We all share information among the cities and county. That's one comment I hear a lot. Others are pretty envious of our ability to share and receive information in a timely manner."

### What To Do with Old Fluorescent Lights?

Carbon fluorescent lights (CFL) contain mercury and so are considered household hazardous waste and, therefore, can not be put in garbage cans that are taken to the landfill.

In October, Home Depot stores in Merced County initiated a program to recycling expired CFLs. The lights can be taken to the store but must be intact to make sure mercury is not released which can harm employees and others who handled the materials. Orange collection boxes are located at the Returns desk.



Prior to the Home Depot program, residents would have to take their CFLs to the Environmental Health drop off site at the Highway 99 landfill in Merced.

The almost 2,000 Home Depot stores across the nation propose to save \$16 million annually in energy costs by switching incandescent bulbs to CFLs in the Light Fixture Showrooms.

This type of bulb switch is an easy way for consumers to save energy. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, if every American switched out one incandescent bulb to a CFL, it would save \$600 million in annual energy costs and prevent greenhouse gases that equal the emissions from 800,000 cars.

### Governing Board Decisions of Oct/Nov; Decisions To Be Made on Dec. 16, 2008

#### In October, MCAG Directors made the following decisions –

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board:

- Release the Highway 59 Landfill Gas Utilization Project RFP
- Authorize the Executive Director of the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board to enter into a contract with a Consultant to assist with proposal evaluations and contract negotiations

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County:

- Request the MCAG Governing Board to reallocate the balance of FY 2008-2009 Local Transportation Funds in the amount of \$993,987 to the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County
- Direct Transit staff to evaluate existing fares and return in 30 days with fare options.

As the MCAG Governing Board:

- Appoint Melissa Kelly-Ortega as the Citizen-at-Large representative to the Citizens Advisory Committee
- Support the submittal of a Fourth Year San Joaquin Valley Region Blueprint Grant Application to Caltrans by October 10, 2008 by Resolution No. 2008/10-16-02
- Shift \$993,987 in LTF funds back to transit to cover the budget shortfall of \$993,987
- Authorize the Executive Director of MCAG to prepare the draft documentation for the Anna M. Fuentes Memorial Scholarship and return that documentation to the Governing Board within 60 days

#### In November, the Directors made the following decisions --

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board:

*There were no agenda items in November.*

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County:

- Set a public hearing for Jan. 15, 2009, 3:00 p.m. to review and possibly adopt fare increases for The Bus
- Directed staff to suspend Saturday service beginning Jan. 1, 2009 through June 30, 2009

As the MCAG Governing Board:

- (add consent agenda)
- Adopted Resolution 2008/11-20-02 stating that there were no unmet transit needs that were reasonable to meet
- Adopted Resolution 2008/11-20-03 approving revised State Transit Assistance claim from Merced County
- Approved actions and policies for the Anna M. Fuentes Scholarship Program to include establishing a 501( c )(3) with the MCAG Governing Board serving as the corporate Board of Directors
- Reconfirmed Directors Nelson and Spriggs to continue serving on the San Joaquin Valley COG Directors Policy Council, and for Director Nelson to continue on the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley

#### In December, the Directors will consider the following –

As the Merced County Regional Waste Management Authority Board:

*There are no agenda items for December.*

As the Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County:

- Realign Route TSA-10 (Gustine-Stevinson-Hilmar-Turlock) into new Route 6 to serve only Hilmar and Turlock, effective Jan. 2, 2009
- Rescind the Nov. 18 action to eliminate transit service on Saturdays

As the MCAG Governing Board:

- Approve the final Vehicle Abatement Plan
- Hold a public hearing to receive comments on the Regional Transportation Plan amendment #2, which includes details on a segmenting/phasing approach for construction of the Los Banos bypass
- Hold a public hearing to receive comments on the draft amendment #3 to the 2009 Interim Federal Transportation Improvement Program, which adds regionally significant projects such as widening Hwy 59, segmenting the Los Banos bypass project, other major road projects, adding bike/pedestrian elements as well as YARTS.
- Appoint a Director as alternate to the San Joaquin Valley Policy Council
- Authorize additional Directors to submit applications to the San Joaquin Valley Partnership

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