

Residents weigh in on transportation priorities

by Jonathan Partridge

Patterson Irrigator, Fri., Feb. 1, 2013

MODESTO — With the click of a remote control-like device, Stanislaus County residents expressed their views on transportation and land use at a workshop Wednesday, Jan. 30 aimed at soliciting input on a future land use plan.

The crowd of about 30 people, most of whom were from Modesto, generally wanted to see the repair of current roads rather than the construction of new ones and wanted to see less sprawl in the future in an aim to preserve farmland.

The workshop, which took place at Seasons Multicultural Events Center in Modesto, served as the kickoff forum for Valley Vision Stanislaus, a 20-year plan that seeks to improve transportation within the county while reducing greenhouse gases.

Stanislaus County Council of Governments officials plan to give a similar presentation — clickers included — at a joint meeting between the Patterson City Council and planning commission on Tuesday, Feb. 5.

“I really see this as the premiere of a good movie — and you can see it 10 more times if you want to,” StanCOG Executive Director Carlos Yamzon said.

StanCOG is a council of city and county governments comprised within Stanislaus County that was established by a joint powers agreement to address regional transportation issues.

The agency’s Valley Vision Stanislaus document aims to create a regional transportation plan that meets the transit needs of the region but it also includes provisions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008. That law requires regional transportation planning agencies, such as StanCOG, to come up with strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by linking land use and transportation.

“If we can get people out of their cars to walk to the store or to use buses, we’re going to try to do that,” Valley Vision Project Manager Jaylen French told attendees Wednesday.

The Valley Vision plan will not supersede the land use authority of local cities or the county, he said.

In the past, housing was not incorporated into the agency’s transportation plan, which is produced every two years, but both Yamzon and French stressed that they are interlinked, as drivers leave for destinations from their homes.

“We’re no longer planning housing or transportation in a vacuum,” French said. “We’re now including both in our plans.”

Transportation funding is in shorter supply these days given the nation’s economic challenges. As a result, StanCOG officials stressed that the county must be selective about its transportation priorities, and the agency is soliciting input from the public to do so.

Several attendees on Wednesday elaborated on their transportation views when consultant Kendall Flint asked for more input.

Newly appointed Hughson City Councilman Harold "Bud" Hill, who expressed interest in expanding existing roadways, said he would particularly like to see expansion of Del Puerto Canyon Road between Patterson and San Jose — an idea that has been tossed around for decades.

“The Central Valley needs a whole new road system to go to the Bay Area,” he said.

He said after the meeting that even if a high-speed train system were put in along the Del Puerto Canyon corridor, it would be less expensive than the high-speed rail project being proposed between Sacramento and Los Angeles. At the same time, he acknowledged that such a project is a “pipe dream.”

Modesto Mayor Garrad Marsh also talked about rail, as he advocated for expanding public transit options, such as bringing the Altamont Commuter Express rail system to Modesto and eventually bringing in high-speed rail.

At the same time, most attendees said that maintaining existing roadways was a higher priority than existing in transit services, and the vast majority said they typically drive alone while traveling places.

When it came to growth, most attendees expressed concern about sprawl and indicated that they thought growth should be far more compact in the future. When Flint asked attendees what should be the top priority, most voted for preserving agriculture.

"It's highly important that we protect agriculture," Turlock resident Bob Endsley said. "We have the most fertile valley in the world."

Still, not everyone was happy with the idea of high-density growth.

One woman, who said she used to live in San Francisco, recalled how some of the high-rise structures there contained low-income residents and were crime-ridden.

"I don't like the idea of people living on top of each other," she said.

Similar questions that were asked of attendees Wednesday appear on a survey that can be accessed on StanCOG's Valley Vision website, and Flint said many of the responses at the workshop were similar to those online.

StanCOG plans to complete the Valley Vision document in October. In the meantime, the agency will have workshops in March in which attendees can share their views on various alternative plans, and the agency will release a draft plan and environmental impact report this summer.

The agency plans to host workshops in all of the cities in Stanislaus County and will also give presentations to local service groups and other organizations during the next few months.

Burn restrictions won't hamper Super Bowl barbecues in the Valley

Visalia Times Delta, Sun., Feb. 3, 2013

If your plans for Super Bowl Sunday include barbecuing, those plans won't be hampered by burning restrictions in the Valley.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District can institute bans in each Valley county on burning wood, brush, trash and other solid fuels based on air quality. And the agency posts those restrictions daily on its website.

But those restrictions don't apply to natural gas and propane barbecues, nor do they apply to barbecues or smokers that use wood or charcoal, said Heather Heinks, a spokeswoman for the air district.

"So Valley residents looking to host a big [barbecue] for the Super Bowl can do so. They would not, however, be able to have a big bonfire ... and hold hot dogs or marshmallows over it to count as an exemption," she said.

As for chimineas and small warming fire pits, they aren't designed for cooking and shouldn't be used if burn restrictions are in effect, Heinks said.

Saturday's air quality in the Valley was projected to be moderate, and burning was expected to be prohibited for the day, according to the air district's website.

To find out if burn restrictions will be in effect Sunday, go to www.valleyair.org and click on the "Check Before you Burn" icon.

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses that in China there are 20% more patients suffering from respiratory problems due to dangerous air pollution levels. For more information, contact Ana Reyes at (559) 230-5851.

China: 20% más enfermos por la fuerte contaminación

Los ingresos hospitalarios por afecciones respiratorias aumentaron un 20 por ciento en Pekín durante la última nube de contaminación que sufrió la ciudad el pasado mes de enero, informó hoy el periódico local Beijing Morning Post.

Por EFE

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Pekín.- El rotativo chino Beijing Morning Post aseguró que, por ejemplo, en el caso de un hospital para niños de la capital china, más de la mitad de los ingresados sufrían infecciones respiratorias.

Aunque desde inicios de este mes el cielo azul ha vuelto a la capital, durante enero la contaminación superó los peores niveles de alerta, algo que motivó la petición a los ciudadanos de que no salieran a la calle.

Además, las autoridades ordenaron la inmovilización del 30 por ciento de los vehículos oficiales o la clausura de 103 fábricas altamente contaminantes.

Durante el mes pasado Pekín registró cotas históricas de polución, concretamente el día 12, cuando la concentración de partículas PM2,5 alcanzó los 993 microgramos por metro cúbico de aire (la Organización Mundial de la Salud considera aceptables los 25 microgramos por metro cúbico).

Todo ello ha provocado la ira de los pekinenses -que han expresado su indignación a través de las redes sociales- y hasta de los medios de comunicación oficiales, que han pedido "acciones concretas" a las autoridades de la ciudad.

El periódico China Daily instó ayer al Gobierno chino a revelar los detalles y las causas de la contaminación "si realmente quiere abordar el problema seriamente".

La constante contaminación del aire de la ciudad se atribuye a las emisiones procedentes de la quema de carbón en las centrales eléctricas próximas y a los humos que desprenden los vehículos de las calles de la capital.