

Growth plan taking hits from all sides

By James Burger, staff writer

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The Kern Council of Governments has finished the delicate job of mapping the county's growth and transportation future -- and been rewarded with grumbling and outright disapproval from environmentalists and developers alike.

State law requires the regional transportation agency to outline a way to provide transportation for a county population projected to grow to more than 1 million by 2020 at the same time it reduces air pollution.

Cars and trucks are one of the major sources of air pollution in the south end of the San Joaquin Valley.

So how do you grow your population and reduce the number of miles cars travel?

You change the way you grow.

KernCOG Executive Director Ahron Hakimi said the group's Regional Transportation Plan calls for a 700 percent increase in investment for walking and bicycling routes and calls for faster, more frequent bus transit trips.

But getting the most attention is the report's call for Bakersfield to nearly triple the amount of multi-family, high density development it builds.

"My goal was to come up with a plan that we could all live with -- not necessarily something that everybody is happy with," Hakimi said. "If we had continued with business as usual, we would not have met air quality conformance standards and greenhouse gas standards."

Hakimi said the new plan swerves sharply away from the sort of large-lot, single-family home suburban sprawl that has been Bakersfield's go-to housing model.

Currently about 8 percent of Bakersfield's housing is high-density.

The KernCOG plan calls for high-density housing -- apartment complexes, urban lofts, duplexes and triplexes-- to make up 23.3 percent of the housing built in Bakersfield in the future.

Home builders hate the plan. But they're supporting it.

Donna Carpenter, representing the Home Builders Association of Kern County, said the county's jobs are in the oil fields, orchards, vineyards and fields.

High-density urban housing increases the miles people drive to those jobs, she said.

But home builders are holding their noses and supporting the KernCOG plan, she said, because state and federal law requires a reduction in air pollution and this is the plan that satisfies those requirements.

"We're stuck in a bad spot. This changes the way we build houses," Carpenter said.

But the proposed KernCOG plan protects federal and state freeway construction dollars from being shut-off if air pollution doesn't get better.

"It's the only way the whole thing works. We hate it. This takes away the market-driven process," she said. "That's a tough pill to swallow."

But environmental groups say the KernCOG plan doesn't go far enough to fight air pollution.

At the April meeting of the KernCOG board, speakers from the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, the Sierra Club and the American Lung Association spoke against the KernCOG plan.

They wanted KernCOG to adopt an alternative plan that called for an equal distribution of development density -- 33.3 percent high-density, 33.3 percent medium density and 33.3 percent low density.

Developers hated that even more.

In a talking-points memo prepared for this past Thursday's meeting of the KernCOG board, the Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce outlined plans to refute arguments for the "33.3 percent" plan.

Hakimi said that his agency has finished taking comments on the draft environmental report for the Regional Transportation Plan and is preparing to finalize the document.

Next month, he said, the board will vote on the plan.

Then responsibility for moving the plan from concept to reality would be shifted to the county of Kern and its various cities.

Kern County Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt said the KernCOG plan is the best compromise and allows for tailored development in Bakersfield and a commitment of resources to develop bicycle, pedestrian and transit infrastructure in the smaller communities that are close to the jobs.

Hakimi said he believes the plan will allow Kern County to reduce air pollution and protect funding for the development of a freeway system that is still critically needed.

The federal government, Hakimi said, has the power to yank freeway funding for Kern County if it doesn't meet air pollution reduction goals.

And there is currently \$199 million in federal freeway earmarks captured by former Bakersfield Congressman Bill Thomas that could be in jeopardy if things go south before the money is committed to projects.

Bakersfield Finance Director Nelson Smith said the city is working quickly to lock that money to projects by the end of 2015.