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Guest View: Dang, these traffic jams

By Christina Fugazi / Stockton City Councilmember

Not too long ago I had to travel to Modesto for a meeting. After looking up the directions from my school in South Stockton and seeing that the expected travel time was 27 minutes, I decided to leave at 5:15p.m. for a 6 p.m. meeting. Big mistake. Upon the approach to Highway 120, I drove into a multiple-lane parking lot on Highway 99 South. There were no accidents, no lanes closed, and no one was getting a ticket.

The 27-minute drive took me more than 90 minutes!

The Central Valley has thousands of Bay Area employees that flood onto the freeways traveling west in the morning and east after work. More than 65,000 northern San Joaquin Valley residents commute to the Bay Area every day during the work week.

What we have now is nice, but it is not enough. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (the Bay Area's regional governance agency for transportation) forecasts up to 75 percent more congestion on I-580 over the Altamont Pass by 2035. We need a safe, reliable, alternative form of transportation to get people from the Valley to the Bay Area and Sacramento. If we don't do something now, it will only get worse.

For the past 25 years, California has not raised its gas tax, and unfortunately, the tax was not indexed. That means that while the costs of building and fixing roads has increased due to inflation, the amount of funding stayed flat.

Had it been indexed, there would have been no need to create SB1. SB1 and its attachment bill, SB132, not only allows us to maintain our roads, it also enables rail to vastly improve services right here in the northern San Joaquin Valley.

The Altamont Corridor Express service has shovel-ready projects, is ready to release a draft environmental document impact report to enable increasing and expanding service, and the public will start to see improvements in the near term.

ACE is purchasing new, cleaner locomotives that can carry more passenger cars. The focus of ACE is to increase the frequency of trips and to expand our service area to Modesto, Ceres, and eventually, Merced. Since ACE is a service that already exists, it can be improved and expanded incrementally as funding becomes available.

The money from the bipartisan SB132 guarantees \$400 million toward reaching our goal to going from four daily round trips to 10 daily round trips and extending ACE farther down the Valley. That funding will help us to leverage additional state funds within SB1 going to the Transit and Intercity Rail Program and Congested Corridors Program as well as additional local and federal funding.

The expansion of ACE also has a big economic development benefit up and down the Valley. In addition to new service in Modesto and Ceres, new or improved stations will be built in downtown Manteca, Ripon, Turlock and Merced. This supports walkable communities and helps revitalize the core of these cities.

There are additional benefits including the improvement of our air quality while lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Future plans are also in the works to increase the Amtrak San Joaquins train service to Sacramento with discussions to expand further north to provide a convenient link to Sacramento International Airport. In coordination with the San Joaquins, ACE is also investigating extending service to Sacramento.

There is one thing about SB1 we all should be able to agree upon. The biggest winner in the measure is the northern San Joaquin Valley. We are very fortunate that Sen. Anthony Cannella (R-Ceres), Assemblymember Adam Gray (D-Merced), and our local representative, Sen. Cathleen Galgiani (D-Stockton) made sure this measure will make a big difference for expanding passenger rail service in the northern San Joaquin Valley.

Before ACE expansion moves forward, there is a process that needs to be followed. The Draft EIR will be out at the end of this month and finalized in October. In between, public input is vital to ensure we meet

the needs of the community. Please check the ACE website for dates of “open house” public meetings and online updates. <http://www.acerail.com/ACEforward>

— *Christina Fugazi is a member of Stockton City Council representing District 5. She is also serves on the Board of Directors for the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District in addition to being a high school science teacher.*