

TRANSPORTATION AND LAND USE OPTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

By Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, August 2009

When Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law SB375 in September 2008, it set into motion a pioneering effort to address greenhouse gas emissions by reducing car trips. What makes the law groundbreaking is that it looks to land use and transportation measures as the means to reduce the need for driving.

The law also established a Regional Targets Advisory Committee (RTAC) appointed by the Air Resources Board. The RTAC is charged with developing a method to set “ambitious and achievable” statewide targets for these types of greenhouse gas emission reductions, and to do so by September, 2009. As a member of the RTAC, I want to include incentives to assist local governments and see that we are realistic in setting a target.

The RTAC has discussed how to encourage walkable neighborhoods, smart growth, transit access, bicycle facilities, shuttles and other measures that can reduce car use. We have also studied external factors such as the price of gas which can greatly influence the number of miles we drive; the differences in rural and urban areas that impact the number of miles driven and the availability of transportation options; the age of the population which is an indicator of the number of people of driving age; income levels, and other factors that can influence the number of trips in a region.

I sit on RTAC as the representative of the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) which encompasses half of the State’s population. As we all know Southern California is very diverse in land use, population densities, income levels and demographics-- all factors that have some bearing on trip behavior. For example, one recent study found that, on average, Thousand Oaks residents make some of the shortest trips in our region, while residents of Lancaster have some of the longest trips. The study suggested that length of trip is related not only to the sprawling nature of an area, but also to the income levels of its residents. For example, in Lancaster many residents cannot afford to live near where they work and choose to drive longer distances. An example of income affecting trip patterns can also be seen at the western edge of our county where Ventura County residents drive long distances to work in Santa Barbara, and at the eastern edge where Los Angeles residents drive into Ventura County to work. An understanding of the factors that influence trips is needed in order to better understand the effectiveness of trip reduction strategies.

SB375 requires local governments to prepare plans called Sustainable Community Strategies outlining transportation and land use measures that will help reduce trips and achieve the greenhouse gas emission targets (that will be set shortly). There will be one Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) plan developed for Ventura County, inclusive of all its cities and the unincorporated area. The anti-sprawl goals of our county fit well with the type of land uses and transportation options that are called for in SB375. Additionally, the need for collaboration among the cities and the county in order to prepare our SCS Plan will help us do some first-of-its-kind regional planning.

The recent decision by the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) and the Ventura Council of Governments (VCOG) to hire the same executive director to guide both agencies was done with a nod toward the need for better collaboration in the face of SB375. It is a small, yet significant step to what I hope will be the eventual merger of these two agencies. Together we can begin making transportation decisions --like which highway to widen or which bus service to extend-- within the broader context of regional planning, including consideration for land use, growth areas, and the preservation of natural habitats and farm land.

To help kick-off the Sustainable Community Strategy Plan for Ventura County, SOAR (Save Open space and Agricultural Resources) is putting on a conference Thursday, September 24th from 8:30a m -12:00pm at the Broome Library at California State University at Channel Islands.

Community leaders, including the Executive Director of SCAG, the Executive Director of VCTC and VCOG, the Executive Director of SOAR, and the City Manager of Ventura, will describe sustainable development options. We will look at how to reduce our climate footprint and achieve environmentally -friendly communities, increase transportation alternatives, and have neighborhoods we can safely and proudly pass on to future generations. If you would like to attend, you can register on a first come, first serve basis by going onto the SOAR website at www.SOARusa.org. Hope to see you there!