CHAPTER 7

A FRAMEWORK FOR MOVING FORWARD – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLAN/SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES STRATEGY
INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the ongoing challenges as well as the future opportunities and strategies to meet these challenges head on.
Ongoing Challenges Facing the San Joaquin Region

Through its role as Regional Transportation Planning Agency for San Joaquin County, the San Joaquin Council of Governments (SJCOG) will forge ahead, providing a forum for regional policy discussions on growth, transportation, environmental management, housing, open space, air quality, fiscal management, and economic development. SJCOG—with its member agencies, regional partners, and community stakeholders—will seriously consider all sides of every issue through consensus building and collaborations. SJCOG recognizes these are essential elements to successful implementation of the Plan.

SJCOG believes the Plan investment strategy is a step toward meeting the air quality, environmental, economic, and mobility needs in the San Joaquin region. It will be an effective vehicle for a comprehensive transportation vision backed by ambitious, but achievable, forecasted development.

However, despite the Plan’s billion dollar investment, it is important to acknowledge that there will be continuing challenges inherent in the delivery of the Plan.

Bowl-Shaped Nature of Valley Conducive to Air Quality Issues

Air quality issues are prevalent due to the geography of the region. The San Joaquin region is located in the federally designated San Joaquin Valley Air Basin. The borders of the basin are defined by mountain and foothill ranges to the east and west. The northern border is consistent with the county line between San Joaquin and Sacramento Counties. The southern border is less defined, but is roughly bounded by the Tehachapi Mountains and, to some extent, the Sierra Nevada range.
According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, this geography creates a “giant bowl” that makes the valley susceptible to air quality problems. The climate in the valley—long, sunny summer days and cold winter nights—are ideal for growing the valley’s renowned agricultural crops. An undesired effect of this type of environment, however, is that it incubates the components of ozone or smog. In the winter, residential fireplaces contribute to tons of dangerous particulate pollution into the skies.

The San Joaquin Valley is currently designated as nonattainment for the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for 8-hour ozone, and PM2.5; however, it has a maintenance plan for PM10, as well as a maintenance plan for carbon monoxide (CO) for the urbanized/metropolitan areas of Kern, Fresno, Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties.

Changing Economy

Rolling out the first Sustainability Communities Strategy (SCS) in the San Joaquin region comes at a difficult time for public agencies. San Joaquin County and the rest of the San Joaquin Valley are still in economic distress. Budget deficits, employee layoffs, and dwindling local revenues remain prevalent issues. As shown in Figure 2.1, in 2011 the valley’s unemployment rate was 16.2 percent, in contrast to 12.2 percent and 10.1 percent for the state and the nation, respectively (see Technical Appendix for San Joaquin Valley Overview). These financial pressures will definitely play a key role in development decisions at the local level. There will be situations where the economic need to approve development near the fringes of cities may outweigh the ability to fully foster the sustainable principles of infill and downtown development.

![Figure 7.1: San Joaquin Valley Unemployment Rate](source: 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Data)
The results of the 2012 California Statewide Local Streets and Roads Needs Assessment show that there has been a steady downward trend in pavement condition since 2008. The majority of California’s counties now have an average pavement condition rating that is considered “at risk” (see maps). Projections indicate that in 10 years, 25 percent of California’s streets and roads will be in the “failed” category. This report also shows that there is a funding shortfall of more than $82 billion over the next 10 years to bring the system up to date. The current funding level for the local system is $2.5 billion a year. Just maintaining the status quo for pavements will require an investment of an additional $1.9 billion a year. (Source: 2012 California Statewide Local Streets and Roads Needs Assessment)

Backlog of Roadway Maintenance

The maintenance investment in the Plan has increased (from the 2011 RTP) but maintenance continues to be in a “catch up” mode due the deferred maintenance backlog. This backlog comprises streets falling into disrepair due to limited funding. The backlog exists because agencies must make hard decisions to invest in preventative maintenance on specific streets while letting some streets simply deteriorate. When streets continue to deteriorate, as evidenced by pothole and pavement cracking, the costs for repairs can be 10 times (or more) the cost of preventative maintenance strategies.
Pavement management programs help local jurisdictions to assess priorities based upon an inventory assessing the Pavement Condition Index (PCI) of regional streets. The PCI is a scale of 0 (failed) to 100 (excellent). This priority setting is a common practice in many city and county public works agencies and is an outcome when maintenance needs outpace funding abilities. San Joaquin County’s average PCI is decreasing from a rating of 70 in 2008 to 67 in 2012. This rating puts the County in an “at risk” category (see Figure 2.2).

Another dilemma is that the cost of pavement maintenance is growing. According to the 2012 California Statewide Local Streets and Roads Needs Assessment, the cost of road repairs and construction has steadily increased and is significantly more than inflation. The study reports that in the last 15 years, paving costs have increased more than eight-fold.

Unfunded Operations and Capital Improvements

Funding constraints are not unique to just maintenance projects. There simply is not enough funding (at any level—federal, state, local) to address roadway capital improvements (new construction projects, interchange improvements, and roadway expansions). New construction for congested roadways are simply “shelved” due to the lack of funding to analyze solutions through feasibility studies or to begin project development phases such as environmental or design work. Jump-starting these project development efforts becomes risky to agencies when there is no reasonable expectation for construction funding. Resources spent on studies and environmental documents are simply wasted resources when the analysis and findings become stale.

Bus and rail transit agencies also feel the burn of funding constraints. Operations funding to finance rail and bus transit frequencies or transit line expansions are costly and experience increases due to labor and employment benefits costs. Operations, in particular, are a category of need where there are highly limited financial resources available to support these activities. As an example, in the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program, operations funding for new transit has been increased from three years to five years. After five years, transit operators will need to find an alternative funding source to backfill that cost. Bus operators in the San Joaquin region, like many operators in other regions, continuously weigh their abilities to finance additional bus transit frequency or expansion of transit lines. In some cases, cuts to existing transit service are a hard financial reality.
In the 2011 Regional Transportation Plan, the cumulative unfunded transportation needs was $8.5 billion dollars across the transportation modes.

Measure K, San Joaquin’s half-cent transportation sales tax, has been around since 1990. Even with the infusion of hundreds of millions of dollars through its “self-help” approach to transportation improvements, the local “grass roots” efforts to address transportation needs cannot do it all. Measure K is already projected to be millions of dollars under earlier financial forecasts and therefore predicted to have a funding shortfall in delivering all the identified transportation improvements. This is why the Plan builds a financial assumption that an additional local transportation sales tax, concurrent with the existing transportation sales tax, is essential in the delivery of the Plan investment strategy.

While road and transit needs are highlighted above, there are clearly unmet needs in bicycle/pedestrian improvements, state highway operational improvements, intelligent transportation systems, and bridge repairs and rehabilitation—just to name a few.
Opportunities

Growing Active Transportation and Public Health Needs

The Plan represents the highest level of investment into active transportation projects than any other RTP. Figure 2.3 shows the role of transportation in promoting physical activity. This is an opportunity to use the Plan goals as a foundational element in future decisions on transportation project priorities. The “multimodal nature” of transportation projects and their ability to create public health benefits will be considerations. Complete streets concepts, which incorporate bicycle lanes as a matter of course in a roadway transportation expansion, will be explored when place-making and smart growth programs are implemented in the San Joaquin region.

Identifying and Preserving Transportation Rail Transit Corridors

Corridor preservation is nothing new to regional planning, but the Plan underscores the great importance in identifying and preserving transportation corridors for future commuter rail service. Corridor preservation is a proactive approach to secure the best possible locations and implement preservation practices so these locations are available when system expansion or enhancement occurs in the future. Some techniques include preventing lost opportunities to secure valuable right-of-way when the opportunity arises or to proactively purchase right-of-way in order to minimize higher costs. The Plan identifies Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) rail transit expansion needs and provides detail on station locations. It is anticipated that through ACEforward, the modernization effort focused on near-term improvements, San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission will continue to look into the future to improve the rail corridor by acquiring dedicated right-of-way to avoid conflicts with freight rail and extending service into neighboring counties.
Expanding Bus Rapid Transit

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a concept that has grown within San Joaquin County since 2007. BRT is similar in function and service to a light rail train; however, it uses standard passenger buses. The current corridor connects the downtown Stockton area with areas directly to the north. Six additional BRT lines are identified in the Plan. Future expansion of this service may include examining additional lines that link Lodi, Stockton, Lathrop, Manteca, and Tracy. Further study will be essential and will include investigating potential right-of-way issues or opportunities.

Figure 7.3
Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Strategies

At the time of development of the Plan, SJCOG, along with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, was developing a TDM Interregional Action Plan (TDM Plan). The purpose of the TDM Plan is to focus on the work-based commute between the San Joaquin and the Sacramento regions along the State Route 99 and Interstate 5 corridors and examine barriers relating to carpooling, vanpooling, transit, biking, and walking. The study will develop a uniform vision and a set of TDM strategies that may include information and education, incentives, physical changes, technology, and pricing. The result will be a TDM Plan that will be coordinated and implemented between the two regions to improve transportation system operations. The goal is to make transportation options convenient, accessible, and safe for commuters.

The TDM Plan follows work completed by SJCOG in a 2013 Multimodal Trip Planning Study. This study provided an assessment of traveler information needs and indicated that there is a need for a “one-stop shop” traveler information system. This one-stop shop can provide information on travel alternatives, not only for commuting, but for other trips that residents of the three-county region (San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced) would make. The future for transportation system strategies would be the exploration of how to implement some of the plan’s strategies to relay information to commuters and other travelers about available options that might save them time or money. If such a system could be in place in the near term, it will play a major role in shifting people from single-occupant vehicles to other modes, allowing for cleaner air and less peak period traffic congestion. With the existing trend of people favoring the easy interface with emerging technologies such as smartphones and tablet computers, this information system can be exactly what the region needs as a TDM tool.

Signs of Economic Recovery

As noted earlier in this chapter, a struggling economy will make it difficult to advance the transportation and land use strategies laid out in the Plan. Upon closer scrutiny of the recession, there are promising signs toward economic recovery which also suggests a lot of promise within the future for sustainability. Economic recovery signs include drops in home foreclosures, and new businesses and retail starting to fill in the vacant storefronts. In addition, unemployment rates are falling while housing prices are rising. The recovery will be long and slow, but the key is that it is moving forward. This gradual upswing—where progress at times may be more in inches than miles—will help public agencies have more windows of opportunity to direct future development in urbanized areas and advance the sustainability goals of the Plan.
Major Strides toward Better Air Quality

Significant legislative policies and strategies have been implemented to improve air quality since the passage of the federal Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is improving. For the first time in recorded history, the San Joaquin Valley had zero violations of the federal 1-hour ozone standard. In 2006, the San Joaquin Valley achieved the federal PM10 standard nearly four years before the required attainment date—a feat unimaginable just a few years earlier.

Despite significant successes in improving air quality, the San Joaquin Valley recognizes that air quality will continue to be a pressing issue that will require the strong, collaborative work of agencies (from the local level up to the federal level) to continuously identify and implement strategies to improve air quality. As the federal Environmental Protection Agency strengthens the National Ambient Air Quality Standards to further protect human health, new strategies will be required to reduce harmful pollution. Increased emphasis will be placed on the coordination of transportation and land use planning to improve air quality and to protect public health.

This leads SJCOG to place more emphasis on the linkage between health and transportation within its regional transportation planning process. More investments in active transportation, cleaner transit fleets, and transit expansion as well as growth patterns supportive of healthy active communities provide building blocks for future collaborative efforts that foster discussions about planning for more healthy active communities. This strategy includes efforts from local jurisdictions in land use development decisions that encourage compact growth as well as economic development that bring jobs closer to housing.

The Commute Connection program serves over 10,000 commuters traveling to and from San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced Counties.

The program’s goal is to improve air quality and relieve traffic congestion by promoting biking, walking, carpooling, vanpooling, and using transit as sustainable alternatives to driving alone.
The following existing, interregional collaborations are just a few examples of forums to stay on top of air quality issues and Senate Bill 375 implementation.

- **San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council:** This 16-member Regional Policy Council was established to discuss and build regional consensus on issues of valley importance. The Regional Policy Council consists of two elected officials and one alternate appointed from each of the eight regional planning agencies’ governing boards in the San Joaquin Valley. The Regional Policy Council is positioned to have a unique and potentially pivotal position in further collaborative efforts and improving the quality of life for all valley residents.

- **Valley Legislative Affairs Committee:** The San Joaquin Valley regional transportation planning agencies (RTPA) have established a Valley Legislative Affairs Committee (VLAC), consisting of staff from the San Joaquin Valley RTPAs. The VLAC tracks pertinent legislation, updates the RTPA directors, and makes recommendations when warranted to the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council.

- **San Joaquin Valley Council of Governments Directors Committee:** This committee comprises the executive directors from each of the eight valley COGs. The committee meets monthly to discuss many issues, including coordinated efforts on SB 375 implementation and consensus building on various air quality policies and issues from the California Air Resources Board.

In 2006, the San Joaquin Valley achieved the federal PM$_{10}$ standard *nearly four years before* the required attainment date.
CONCLUSION

This is only a snapshot of the many challenges and opportunities that lie ahead as we move forward in creating sustainable communities. The clear policy goals and strategies outlined in the Plan, however, provide a “Plan of Action” that represents the feedback received from San Joaquin public agencies, community members, businesses, and other stakeholders. The Plan also shows that it performs in delivering these strategies. It fits the bill for what is needed in the San Joaquin region while addressing climate change through its integrated land use and transportation planning efforts.