

California's future about to be reshaped

CARB ready to adopt SB 375 growth standards; an effort to end to urban sprawl

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California may take on a mass transit-centric, almost European, look in the future, now that the California Air Resources Board is about to adopt recommendations in SB 375, a 2008 law that dramatically reshapes how land use decisions are made.

CARB's staff has issued a report that proposes targets to "guide" planning that will be more regional in nature and centered around mixed use developments along rail or express bus corridors.

It's the first major milestone in implementing SB 375, authored by state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento and signed by Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

CARB's staff proposes targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 and 2035 associated with passenger vehicle travel in the state's 18 "Metropolitan Planning Organizations," including the four largest: Southern California, San Diego, the Bay Area, and the Sacramento region.

The Air Resources Board is expected to adopt the recommendations at its September board hearing.

The state says it wants Californians to live closer to one another and give up their cars to a greater extent. The mixed use developments, in theory, would put housing units close to employment and retail. Denizens would walk, bike or take mass transit to and from work, school and retail and recreation activities.

The CARB staff's announcement includes a recommendation that the Sacramento region should reduce emissions related to transportation and growth by 16 percent by the year 2035.

The eight planning organizations that cover the San Joaquin Valley have a target of a 5 percent reduction in per capita emissions by 2020, and a 10 percent reduction by 2035.

Once the targets are finalized, cities within each planning region will be required to work together with their regional planning agency on developing a so-called "Sustainable Community Strategy" that outlines where growth and development will occur, and how the transportation system can support that growth, so that the region's pollution reduction targets can be achieved. Cities and municipalities retain full local decision making and zoning authority, CARB says.

Regions that meet the targets will receive incentives in the form of easier access to federal funding and streamlined environmental review for development projects.

"SB 375 is an incredible opportunity to reverse skyrocketing trends in chronic illnesses and obesity and tackle a root cause of California's worst-in-the-nation air pollution," says Bonnie Holmes-Gen, senior policy director, American Lung Association of California.