

# New challenges require new thinking

Gary Polakovic, Ventura County Star, 5-1-10

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Ventura County has a laudable track record reckoning with urban sprawl, but a new challenge lies ahead that will put its reputation for smart growth to the test.

Two recent state laws, SB375 and AB32, for the first time link local land-use decisions to reductions in emissions linked to global warming. The goal is to not only reduce greenhouse gases, but drive innovative solutions to build cities that meet our needs without ruining natural resources for future generations.

Yet, early indications suggest local government officials must first overcome business-as-usual thinking. The eyes of the state are upon Ventura County, which led the way for farmland and open space protection in the 1990s under the pioneering Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources initiatives, to chart a course for the 21st century.

The dilemma lies in the fact that the very things not working in our cities today — too much traffic, too few transit alternatives, too much air pollution, too few parks and open space — result from conventional thinking about how towns should be assembled and connected. To be sure, change is occurring, but it must come faster now to meet the new mandates.

The challenge is evident following a series of high-level meetings across Ventura County, including a joint session of the Ventura County Transportation Commission, Ventura Council of Governments, and the Southern California Association of Governments at California Lutheran University where elected officials and civic leaders were polled last month on a variety of development and transportation issues.

The results reveal deeply ingrained convention among local government leaders. To wit:

- ◆ About half of the respondents made clear that increasing building heights as a tool for better land-use mix is not likely to happen.
- ◆ Only 41 percent indicated they have already, or likely will, concentrate new housing and jobs near transit stations.
- ◆ 59 percent of those surveyed indicated they have no plans to decrease free parking to encourage transit use.
- ◆ 74 percent stated their jurisdictions would not likely use transportation development funds on transit only and use alternate funding source for maintaining local roads.

To comprehend the challenge, contrast those attitudes with realities on the ground. Consider that computer models show that in 20 years the county's housing growth will be scattered across many cities, yet the job growth will be concentrated along the Highway 101 and Highway 118 corridors — a recipe for increased traffic.

Or consider that Ventura County is projected to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from vehicle trips at half the rate of the rest of the Southern California region. Or consider only 8 percent of Ventura County commuters carpool, yet Ventura County is the only urban county in Southern California still without a high-occupancy vehicle, or HOV, lane on its freeways.

Or consider that, according to the Automobile Club of Southern California, Ventura County transportation expenditures total about \$4 per person today, among the lowest of AAA's 13 Southern California counties and down from \$60 per capita in 1965.

That helps account for the fact that just 1 percent of the county's commuters use mass transit, due in part because mass transit links between urban centers within the county and to other parts of Southern California are limited at best.

Yet, transportation improvements are the quickest way to get greenhouse-gas reductions and meet SB375 requirements.

But these new mandates are just the beginning. The world's climate scientists have reached consensus that human activities contribute to global warming and that an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gases will be necessary to avert the worst, but not all, impacts of a super-heated planet. By contrast, California's new mandates are designed to achieve a relatively modest 20 percent reduction in emissions.

Clearly, something has to give. Despite its progressive policies on open space, Ventura County risks becoming the Land of No if it rejects tall buildings, increased urban density, transit investment, development of open space and transit links to hubs inside or outside the county.

Visionary and bold leaders carried SOAR to success. Now it's time for new leadership to take the next big steps toward building safe, vibrant and healthy places to live and work.