

# Climate change bill will change shape of cities

**Redding Record-Searchlight, 4-29-10**

“We’re from Sacramento, and we’re here to help.”

Cut through the acronyms and the bureaucratic verbiage about “sustainable communities strategies” and “alternative planning strategies,” and that was the message from a California Air Resources Board representative at Tuesday’s meeting of the Shasta County Regional Transportation Planning Agency board.

The local elected officials who make up that board can be forgiven for their skepticism.

Kurt Karperos, the Air Resources Board’s head of air quality and transportation, came to Redding to explain the details of Senate Bill 375, a 2008 law that aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions through better urban planning. The goal is to reduce driving by building more compact communities and providing more transportation alternatives — from walking to mass transit — so every little trip doesn’t require starting the car.

Opponents of the law denounce it as requiring everyone to live in a condo by the railroad tracks, but Karperos told a different story. Shasta County’s “sustainable communities strategy,” he said, will be built from the ground up, based on local input and local priorities. The state is not, he stressed, imposing one-size-fits-all plans. What works in Los Angeles won’t work in Redding, he said, and vice versa.

“Our job is to help you realize your vision,” he told the board.

That’s all very soothing, but is it true?

As the board’s chairman, Redding City Council member Dick Dickerson, asked, if local decision-makers are in charge anyway — as they already are — “Then why are we doing this?”

The answer is that SB 375 is the law, and that reducing carbon dioxide emissions is a state mandate. As gently as state officials might try to break the news, those laws will change how we do business locally.

Later this year, the Air Resources Board will set long-term targets for reducing vehicle miles traveled. (The target will apply per resident, so population growth will not in itself lead to violations.) If we don’t meet those targets, over time, courts will start striking down local governments’ approval of new developments for not complying with the law. And, on the flip side, we’ll stop receiving our share of state transportation dollars if we don’t do things the state’s way.

That’s not all bad. SB 375’s incentives to build smarter cities hold a lot of promise — for encouraging infill development in cities’ existing footprints instead of never-ending sprawl, for providing a spectrum of ways to get around town. (That’s not just a green issue: Next time gasoline flirts with \$5 a gallon, as it did in 2008, even ardent climate-change skeptics will appreciate a few options.)

Like any change, it will bring good and bad. Unfortunately, the state and local planners whose job is to put SB 375 into action are working so hard to downplay the shift involved that they might just persuade citizens and decision-makers to ignore the law altogether.

That, we would do at our peril. Sooner or later, the hammer of SB 375's mandates will fall on Shasta County. And we'll need to be ready.