

Region begins new drive to curb greenhouse gases

Denis Cuff, Bay Area News Group, 4-24-10

Four regional agencies have launched a major drive to rein in greenhouse gas pollution by reducing vehicle use, increasing public transit use and promoting compact development in the Bay Area's nine counties.

Cities and counties will be asked to designate areas for developing compact housing and businesses in established areas with good access to rail lines, buses and ferries.

Leaders around the Bay likened the plan to pioneering environmental initiatives such as saving the Bay from fill in the 1960s and founding the East Bay Regional Park system in the 1930s.

Transit and land-use planners will be asked to determine how they can jointly help the Bay Area meet vehicle travel reduction targets to be set by the California Air Resources Board. The plan is required by 2013 under Senate Bill 375, which California lawmakers passed two years ago in a bid to reduce greenhouse gases.

"Decision-making about land use is about to change," said Santa Clara County Supervisor Ken Yeager, also a member of regional transportation and pollution boards. "Change is coming. We need to do it right or there will be a lot of people upset and there will be a backlash."

Yeager, also a California Air Resources Board member, made his remarks Thursday in Oakland before 350 people at a summit to kick off the four-agency planning drive, called the Sustainable Cities Strategy.

The partner agencies include the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Association of Bay Area Governments, Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

Later in the day, the debate over planning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in economic hard times flared up in Sacramento among elected city leaders from throughout California.

The California League of Cities' governing board rejected a resolution urging the state to suspend deadlines for SB375 as well as for Assembly Bill 32, the first law in the nation setting state goals to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Back at the Oakland summit, Michael Woo, a former Los Angeles city councilman, told the audience that the development industry slump is a good time to revamp land-use and transportation planning.

"If you try to make changes when the economy is hotter, there is more resistance," said Woo, dean of the Cal Poly Pomona College of architectural and environmental design.

Woo said the success of California's attempts to limit global warming gases depend on the Bay Area providing a strong model for other regions in reducing auto and light truck use, which is responsible for 40 percent of the state's greenhouse gas emissions.

Not everyone at the summit supported the greenhouse gas plan. Ed West, vice mayor of American Canyon in southern Napa County, said it is a mistake to devote so much time to a greenhouse gas reduction plan because it diverts attention and resources from creating businesses and jobs.

Besides, West said, many Bay Area residents live in areas where the limited public transit gives them no choice but to drive.

"You can take the subway if you live in New York City," West said. "But how do I get to the Bay Area from Napa County? I have to drive. Until we're willing to connect these areas, and no is willing to do that, it's a waste of time and money to do all this."

About 10 percent of Bay Area workers ride public transit to their jobs; most drive.

Regional transportation planners said their plan is an attempt to put jobs and housing closer together to shorten commutes.

Oakland, San Francisco, Walnut Creek, Vallejo and many cities already have done much to foster housing and business development near BART, bus or ferry stations.

"We're not starting from scratch," said Scott Haggerty, an Alameda County supervisor who chairs the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.