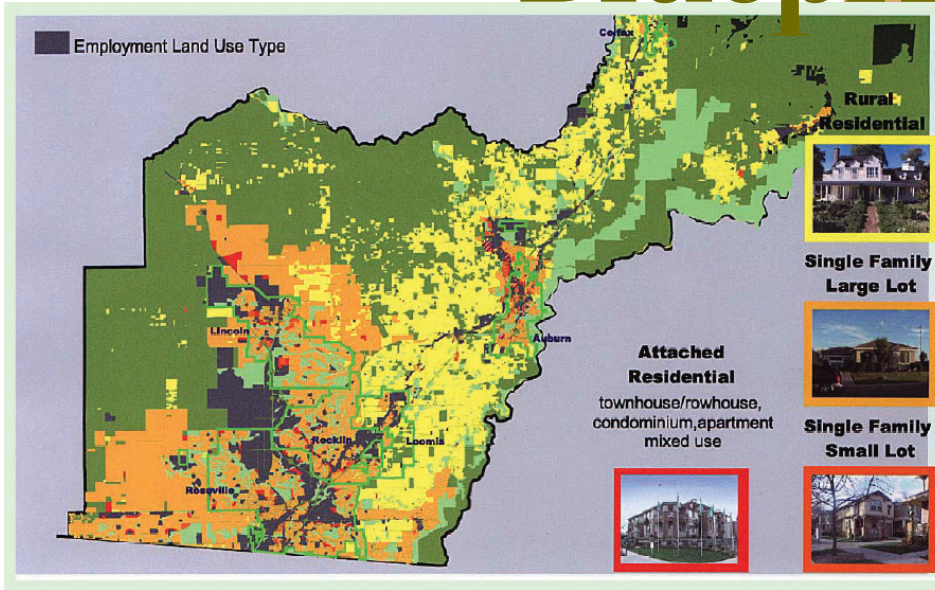


Blueprint for



Graphics and photos courtesy SACOG

a Valley

To hear Martin Tuttle tell it, the epiphany for the Sacramento Valley's regional transportation planners came two years ago.

That's when they realized that the \$22.5 billion list of new roads and transit projects they had just approved would not reverse the area's ever-worsening traffic.

As is often the case in California, the projected increases in population and traffic were startling. Even in the unlikely event that every project on the Sacramento Area Council of Government's list was built, the explosive growth would still create a 50 percent increase in traffic tie-ups by 2025. The number of cars driving on some main arteries would more than double.

"It became obvious to everyone that whether we built our region out with roads or transit, congestion would still get worse," says Tuttle, executive director of the council, which di-

rects state and federal transportation dollars in the six-county state capital region. "The consensus of the group was that we had to look at land use," he says.

So SACOG embarked on the Blueprint Project, a \$3 million, three-year effort to devise an alternative growth plan for a region whose population is projected to double by 2050—to nearly four million. SACOG planners spent months poring over growth patterns, local general plans, and economic trends before publicly launching the project at a November 2002 conference entitled "Tall Order: Balancing Our Region's Needs."

The idea was to engage the citizens of the sprawling Sacramento area in deciding whether

to continue growing with largely low-density, single-family neighborhoods, or to embrace a more compact development pattern with far more multifamily housing.

Valley Vision, a local nonprofit group that advocates regional planning, was brought in as a partner to conduct outreach to a broad cross-section of the community. The group contributed \$400,000 in foundation funding to help pay for the Blueprint process. Other funding came from a variety of local and federal government sources, as well as private grants.

Following the conference, SACOG held 40 workshops to consider different planning scenarios, first for specific communities and then for each of the region's six counties.



An alternative
growth plan
for the
Sacramento
area.

By Mary Lynne Vellinga



Area residents at SACOG workshops like this one held last year in Yuba County seem to like higher density scenarios. Scenario A (opposite) would continue current trends (keyed to map by the frame colors). Left: project manager Mike McKeever.

Workshop participants were told that if current building practices continue, the region will consume 400,000 more acres of rural land by 2050—nearly doubling the size of the urban area. Tuttle calls this “the greater Atlanta” example.

Thus far, the crowds packing SACOG workshops overwhelmingly have rejected the status quo in favor of “smart growth,” higher density, and pedestrian-friendly construction. In the fast-growing foothill suburb of Folsom, a group of participants in a 2003 workshop proposed to replace a closed Kmart store with high-rise apartments, to build mid-rise apartments on the site of a bowling alley, and to turn a Wal-Mart into a greenbelt.

Whether the regional planning agency will be able to turn such sentiments into meaningful change in local planning and zoning decisions remains to be seen. William Fulton, author of the *Guide to California Planning*, notes that the elected officials in charge of councils of government like SACOG often “have a hard time pulling the trigger on their own members.”

Instead, “COGs generally gravitate toward the lowest common denominator approach; it’s the nature of the beast,” says Fulton, who was recently elected to the Ventura city council.

The old days

For years, Tuttle says, Sacramento’s COG

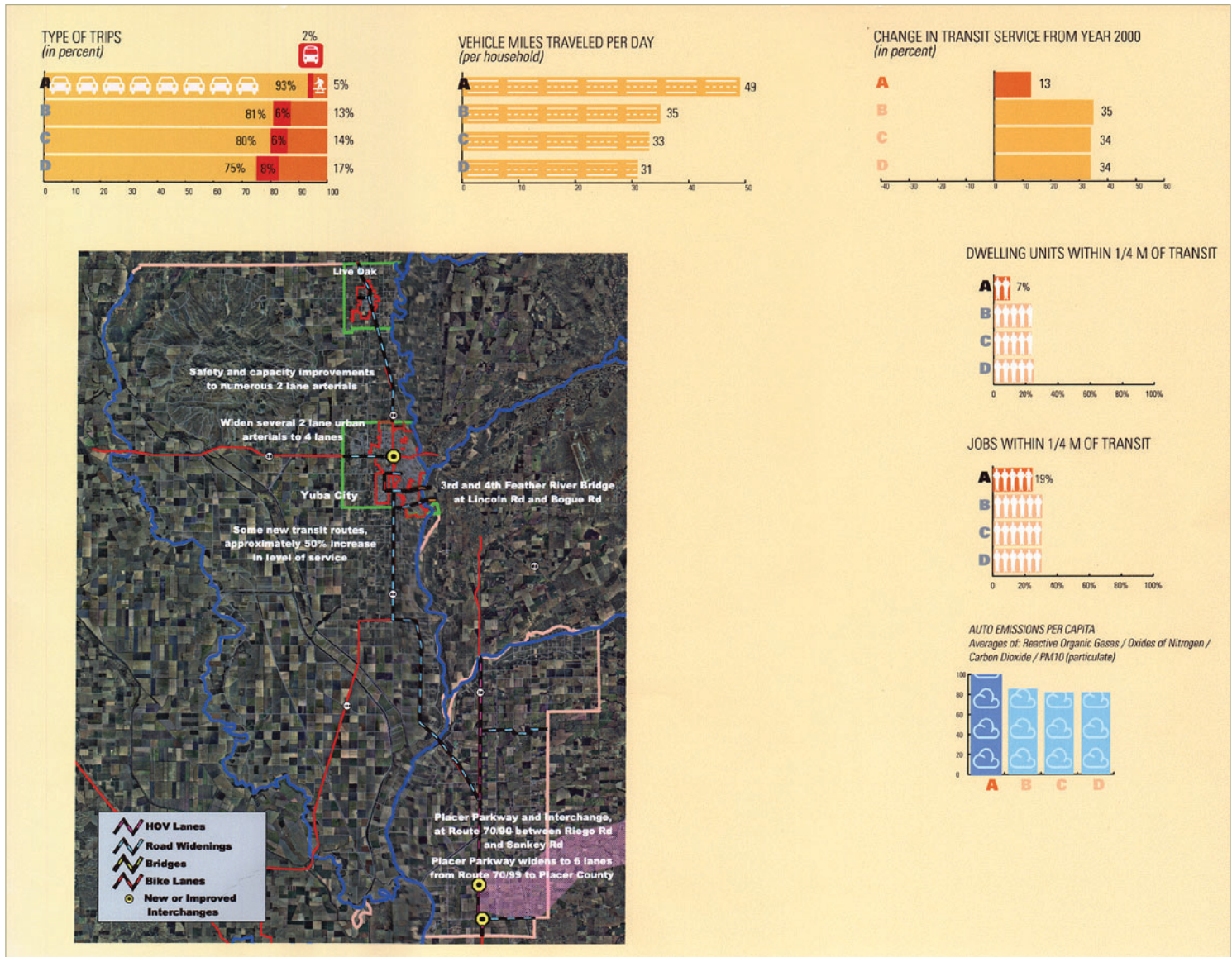
failed to exercise regional vision in deciding where to spend transportation dollars. Instead, the organization “chased development with transportation projects” requested by individual governments.

Meanwhile, a housing boom left area highways increasingly burdened. A study last year by the Texas Transportation Institute pegged Sacramento’s rush hour traffic the ninth worst in the nation. One result is a major smog problem. The Sacramento region lives under constant threat of the loss of federal highway funds because of its failure to meet federal air quality standards.

Nor has public transit always fared well. In Sacramento County, for instance, the supervisors have largely failed to enforce general plan provisions calling for mixed-use, transit-oriented development.

The 2002 Metropolitan Transportation Plan was the organization’s first major attempt to deal with the problem. A 55-person roundtable of business leaders, environmentalists, and community activists spent more than two years hashing out the details of the plan, which called for extending light rail to the airport and building two connector parkways to ease traffic on area freeways and make it easier to commute between suburban job centers.

Before, SACOG would simply collect local governments’ funding requests, “staple them together,” and call them a regional transportation plan, Tuttle says.



Blueprint uses an innovative planning software called PLACE (3)S to estimate and project the effects of land-use changes on air quality, vehicle miles traveled, number of jobs created, and so on.

Now, with the Blueprint Project, SACOG is making its first significant foray into local land-use politics. Board members say one of the main drivers behind the organization's increased activism is Tuttle, who was hired as executive director in 1999.

Previously, he worked for the Solano Transportation Authority and spent 13 years as a top aide to a majority leader of the California State Assembly, Tom Hannigan.

A crucial moment for the Blueprint project will come on April 30, when SACOG plans another Tall Order forum. Some 1,300 attendees will be asked to choose whether they want the region to continue growing as it has, or to pick one of three alternatives that would result in less land consumption. Then, in September, area residents will get a chance to

weigh in through an electronic town hall broadcast on local television stations.

When the region's transportation plan is updated next year, as required by federal law, Tuttle says, SACOG intends to base its spending decisions on the preferred growth scenario.

Once it decides what its highest priorities are, the agency could accelerate construction of major road and transit improvements that would normally take decades by bonding against its future revenues, something it has never done before, Tuttle says. Such projects could include major bypass corridors, designed to ease congestion on Interstate 80, Highway 50, and Highway 99, as well as major connector roads.

"By the end of this we hope to have a shared vision among the cities and counties, the elected officials, and the public on where

we're headed, so we can accelerate the construction of major capital projects," he says.

Resistance

That plan could face some resistance from members of SACOG's board, whose structure was recently changed to give suburban representatives more say.

Much of the region's population has historically been located in unincorporated Sacramento County, but in recent years, large swaths of county territory have incorporated, creating several new cities. In addition, rapid growth on the urban edge has spawned affluent power centers in the former small towns of Folsom, Roseville, and Elk Grove.

These cities were instrumental in killing another attempt at regionalism, a 2002 bill by

Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) that would have required local governments to share some of their jealously guarded sales taxes. The SACOG board was so divided on the bill it was unable to take a position.

Elk Grove in particular has raised objections to the Blueprint. With a population of about 100,000, it is the region's second most populous city after Sacramento, which has about 433,000 residents.

"There are definitely some very good things coming out of the Blueprint Process, and it's raising some good questions," says Eric Norris, planning manager for Elk Grove. "We just have some concerns about the way they're doing it, and the way the process is running." Norris declined to elaborate, but a PowerPoint presentation recently created by the city questions SACOG's demographic projections, and suggests that attendance at its workshops is skewed toward those favoring "smart growth" and that city councils have been left out of the process.

Elk Grove successfully pressed the SACOG board to adopt language saying that the Blueprint "would help guide" but not "dictate" how transportation funding decisions are made, Tuttle says.

But he doesn't think this language will affect the results of the plan. And he insists that Elk Grove is in the minority on the 32-member SACOG board.

National models

In many ways, SACOG's Blueprint Project resembles similar efforts undertaken around the country in recent years. It was modeled on the Envision Utah process. "We took their outreach playbook and just replicated it," Tuttle says.

And the folks in Utah approve. "The Blueprint Project is a groundbreaking, high-quality regional visioning effort," says Robert Grove, founding chairman of Envision Utah. "It is on the cutting edge of helping the public to understand their future and to make good choices about what they want their region to be like."

But SACOG has taken the idea of grassroots planning even further than Utah with the use of a planning method and a GIS software program, PLACE(3)S. The program, which was developed through a collaborative effort of several state agencies, allows workshop audiences to see the consequences of their planning decisions in real time.

Blueprint project manager Mike McKeever, AICP, who has worked on regional planning

efforts around the country, including in Portland, Oregon, has been involved with the development of the PLACES software since its inception in the mid-1990s. Several other planning consultants have also been instrumental, he says; among them, Fregonese Calthorpe & Associates, Space Imaging Resources, Parsons Brinckerhoff, and EcoInteractive Inc.

He notes that the GIS program has been used elsewhere, but previously it ran only on ArcView software. The difference in Sacramento is that, for the first time, PLACE(3)S can easily be run off the world wide web in remote locations. "It's a lot more accurate and a lot faster," he says.

The backbone of the program is a database containing information on all 700,000 parcels of land in the region. The database can be quickly manipulated on the web in a public meeting. A group of workshop participants can say they want to tear down a retail store and build housing on a particular parcel, for instance, and the computer will tell them how that decision will affect jobs, housing, traffic, and air quality.

McKeever says that more than 30 SACOG employees, from secretaries to deputy administrators, have been trained in the software and have helped to conduct workshops attended by 3,600 people.

Putting PLACE(3)S on the web "was the real breakthrough that Mike was able to do in Sacramento," says Ron Thomas, AICP, executive director of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. After visiting Sacramento, NIPC staff members recently started running their own computer program, "Paint the Region," on the web in Chicago-area public workshops. "It makes the process very fast," says associate planner Jignesh Mehta.

McKeever and Thomas belong to a small national coterie of planners who specialize in regional visioning efforts. In the early 1990s, McKeever worked as a consultant to the 27 cities and counties in the Portland, Oregon, area in the process of strengthening the regional government there.

Resources

Blueprint. For more on the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, go to www.sacog.org. For more on the Blueprint Transportation/Land Use Study, project, go to www.sacregionblueprint.org. The nonprofit Valley Vision is at www.valleyvision.org. **PLACE(3)S.** Check out www.energy.ca.gov/places.

'It can work here'

Even without a Portland-style central regional planning authority, which in that case was created by the state legislature, McKeever believes that meaningful regional planning can result from a process like Blueprint, as long as it reflects public consensus.

"Everybody looks at the Portland experience and says, 'That's a once-in-the-nation kind of experience because of the political system,'" he says. "They don't understand that the reason the political system could happen in the first place was because the [regional government] charter was written very reasonably, and it had the support of local governments."

His involvement has lent credibility to the Blueprint Project in the eyes of Sacramento's major environmental group, the Environmental Council of Sacramento. "I think that the success of the Blueprint project is embodied in a personality, first and foremost, and that's Mr. McKeever," says David Mogavero, a Sacramento architect and ECOS board member.

"I'm really pleased with the results [of the workshops]," Mogavero continues. "There's a lot of clarity about what the public is interested in. Most communities have said fairly simply: 'We want smart growth, and we're happy getting some of it as infill.' The million dollar question is what bearing this is going to have on land-use politics in the region."

William Fulton notes that implementation has been the hard part for most regional visioning efforts, including Envision Utah. "There's a big difference between having a spectacular success at regional visioning and getting it implemented," he says. "That's very difficult, when you have to go back to your city councils and convince them to alter their zoning."

But in Tuttle's mind, the Blueprint Project is already a success even if it goes no further. This fall, the agency plans to award the first of \$500 million in planning grants for compact, transit-friendly projects. And several local jurisdictions are already using the growth scenarios generated by the agency to craft their general plans.

Moreover, Tuttle says, the public has been exposed to "good data" about the consequences of planning decisions, and that is bound to change the local culture. "Planning in Sacramento has been advanced," he says, "and it will not go back to the old ways. If we were to shut down today, we would have succeeded."

Mary Lynne Vellinga covers regional growth for *The Sacramento Bee*.