

**Fresno Council of Governments (Fresno COG)
SB 375 Task Force
2035 Tulare St., Ste. 201
Fresno, CA 93721**

March 20, 2012

Dear Chair David Fey and Fresno COG SB 375 Task Force Members:

Thank you very much for your work to create target-setting scenarios for the implementation of SB 375. In its February meeting, the Task Force resolved to create three scenarios, including one with “creative changes” that went beyond the soon-to-be-updated general plans to portray what an ambitious but achievable Sustainable Communities Strategy might achieve for the region.

We are writing with suggestions about what such a scenario might include, based on our history as organizations working for cleaner air, cleaner water, social justice, economic development, and healthy communities in Fresno County. We encourage the committee to create a forward-looking scenario similar to the Full Build Out Transit Oriented Development (TOD) scenario and that embraces the following principles:

Create walkable neighborhoods with jobs and shops nearby

The great neighborhoods in our cities, towns, and rural communities will form the foundation of any Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS). The SCS should direct growth in a way that strengthens these neighborhoods. The scenario should focus first on filling vacant lots, redeveloping underused or vacant strip malls, upgrading infrastructure and transit services in existing communities, and upgrading housing supply. Building a mix of new homes and jobs in existing neighborhoods at sufficiently high densities can provide jobs, shopping, parks, schools, daycare, transit, and medical services within convenient walking or biking distance from homes. It can also help protect our region’s valuable agricultural economy and natural landscapes.

To further promote walking and biking, the scenario should create a well-connected network of sidewalks and local bikeways to ensure safe walking and biking. These should be particularly dense around key destinations, such as schools, employment centers, public and school bus stops, and transit hubs. Currently 7.5% of all transportation trips are on foot or by bike, and through careful land use and transportation planning we would like to see this number double to 15%. This target is well within reach, since in Southern California – a broad region that extends to the Mexico and Nevada borders – over 20% of all trips are walking and biking.

Create a diversity of housing options at all income levels

In Fresno County today, two-thirds of all homes are single-family homes, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Of the over 10,000 Fresno County homes in foreclosure or pre-foreclosure according to RealtyTrac, the majority are detached single-family homes, due in part to an overexpansion of suburban development patterns. Between 2010 and 2035, Fresno will add approximately 96,000 new

homes according to the February 2012 San Joaquin Valley Demographic Forecast Project of the Planning Center. The Full Build Out TOD scenario would move toward a better housing balance by building significant numbers of townhomes and apartments. One scenario should include a robust mix of housing choices, including a significant number of multi-family homes with easy access to employment opportunities and public transportation. It should also provide incentives for local governments to carefully work to prevent displacement of current residents from their homes.

Any scenario should include homes affordable at different income levels. The Task Force's February scenarios powerpoint suggests that a substantial portion of demand for TOD units is in lower-income brackets. This underscores the need for infill and TOD housing to be available to households across the economic spectrum. Reducing the need to "drive 'till you qualify" could allow people to live closer to their jobs, save money on gas, and reduce air pollution in the process.

Finally, the scenario should not just expand housing choices in urban areas but fill in vacant lots in smaller towns and unincorporated communities and upgrade basic infrastructure and the housing supply in legacy communities located near agricultural employment. Through careful efforts to protect existing residents, upgrade infrastructure, and provide transit links, these communities can become mixed-income and sustainable communities for rural living and ameliorate clusters of rural poverty. A focus on revitalizing existing communities will also help sustain the region's working farms, ranches and natural landscapes, protecting the valuable services that these provide.

Expand access to viable public transportation options

The other key backbone of SB 375 work can be our existing public transportation networks. One scenario should focus growth around existing transportation networks, increase frequencies of existing lines, and also create new lines that reach more existing households. Fresno already has many successful bus corridors that connect neighborhoods to one other and to downtown, and many bus lines are standing room only during commute hours. Promoting infill opportunities near those should be a priority.

Expanding frequencies on existing lines would be an easy way to make public transit a viable transportation choice for more people. Currently, four lines have 20-minute frequencies during peak hours, so adding just one bus per hour would boost them to "high quality" frequency. Lines that serve lower-income populations, which are more likely to ride the bus if available, should be expanded first to maximize the air quality benefits of the transportation investment.

An ambitious scenario could also create transit-ready corridors along other bus rapid transit (BRT) study lines. Recent planning efforts have considered a half-dozen BRT / streetcar alignments then selected only a few. Planning for TOD along more of these possible lines would make them ready for future expansions.

Finally, the scenario should explore rural transportation services that provide lifeline and paratransit service to rural residents, and that connect smaller towns to one another and to Fresno at frequencies that make them a real travel alternative. Similarly, transit related infrastructure, such as

bus shelters, curbs and sidewalks is necessary to support and promote transportation service improvements. The “unmet needs” process has surfaced a list of deserving transit projects that can be a resource in identifying top-priority transit expansions.

Thank you for considering our suggestions on the Task Force’s target-setting scenarios. We would be happy to work with you to develop an ambitious scenario that promotes greater equity, public health, economic opportunity, air quality and environmental sustainability.

Sincerely,

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