

Time to weigh in on our future

Not happy with the way your City Council or Board of Supervisors is managing the area's transportation grid? Frustrated with their inconsistent approach to fighting sprawl?

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It's not often that government asks the rest of us to weigh in on our own future. But that's precisely what the Kern Regional Blueprint Project is inviting people to do this week.

Not happy with the way your City Council or Board of Supervisors is managing growth? Worried about air quality and transportation? Wondering what other realistic options might be out there? Register your feelings when the Kern Council of Governments convenes the Blueprint summit Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. at the DoubleTree Hotel in Bakersfield.

With Kern County expected to hit 2.1 million residents in the next half-century, it's incumbent upon us all to establish priorities -- and make sure elected officials are clearly aware of them.

Those officials will be there, too -- or at least they're supposed to be. All 63 elected city councilmembers from Kern County's 11 incorporated cities, along with the five county supervisors have been invited to attend the three-hour meeting -- part of a valleywide and statewide effort to tap citizens for their thoughts and ideas.

This is not a group sing. Tortured renditions of "Kumbaya" are not on the agenda. This is about providing guidance to the elected men and women who ultimately make our planning decisions -- guidance that must be consistent from town to town.

"Working collaboratively is more important than it's ever been," said Darrel Hildebrand, assistant director of the Kern Council of Governments. "We're coming to a critical mass. The compounding nature of the decisions we're making is becoming more important every day."

Subjects on the table -- interrelated topics all -- include transportation, housing, land use, farmland and open space preservation, water, the economy and quality of life issues.

Robert Grow, the Salt Lake City-based founding chairman emeritus of Envision Utah, a public-private partnership that analyzes options for regional growth, will be Thursday's keynote speaker.

He notes that Salt Lake City is one of the most conservative places in the country. Yet the Utah capital city has built 92 miles of commuter rail as well as a popular light rail system. "One out of every four workers in downtown Salt Lake City arrives on a train," he told *The Californian* Tuesday.

An efficient public transportation system "means couples could shed a car," he said. "It means older people can get around" after they've given up driving.

Grow says he's not trying to sell Kern County on light rail, however. "I'm an advocate for whatever your region is doing, what your people decide is best for what they want to achieve."

And determining that is what the Blueprint is all about.