

Planners, Paradox and Personal Choice

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. I am always ready to come to Yosemite, and as I drive through the Park, I am grateful for the foresight of those who set aside these magnificent places—our National Parks. I have visited many of our national treasures, from Maine to Arizona but for me, the best is right here in Yosemite.

And I'm glad that those who favor "market forces" above all did not prevail when the conservation decisions about the Parks were being made. If "highest and best use" was the only test of value, then there would be some great view lots for sale on top of Half Dome!

We live in interesting times—we live with paradox: public policy choices today are hard, because they are complicated by good and bad on both sides.

- When we first began talking about regions a few years ago, we discovered that we had to get bigger and smaller at the same time. Regions are OK, but we had to work with neighborhoods too—a smaller and more manageable organizational unit—that people could experience and relate to at the very most local level.
- As a nation we aspire to better education for our young people to be more competitive in the global market, but we often balk at paying the cost of schools.
- We regularly cry for political leadership, but rarely elect those who give us honest, but sometimes "bad" news.

So as I look at planning and land use in California today, there are paradoxes—there is cause for optimism and pessimism all at the same time.

I am concerned about the declining role of public planners—city and county planners who work in the public interest to create visions for communities that include housing for everyone, connected neighborhoods and beautiful public spaces. All too often they are becoming simply Plan Checkers, while developers and large landowners design villages and whole communities with an eye toward the market, rather than to the community. Who will be responsible for providing affordable housing, or for connecting to the community? Or for paying for improvements in older neighborhoods?

New towns and master planned communities provide a great quality of life for those who live in them, but too often they contribute to social fragmentation and the breakdown of a shared sense of community.

I am concerned about the "too long time: planning and land use takes, wearing down most citizen participation and discouraging all but the most zealous. I recently heard a story about a Village Development in a valley city recently, a vision of new urbanism endorsed by a vote of the community, and then over more than ten years, the vision eroded and was dismantled, piece by piece, until just recently the last piece, the village center was put aside in favor of an old style strip mall. Few citizens have the commitment to stay with a project for ten years or more, to attend hearings, meetings and

argue against what the property owners and investors want in favor of the community's vision.

I am concerned about the economic pressures that are driving the cost of land conservation out of reach. If farmland or open space gets entitled, even in the most preliminary way, the price escalates, making conservation purchases enormously expensive, or threatens "takings" litigation, a financial risk that few local governments can afford to take. Farmland in the Valley is generally not open to easements because the speculative price of land is so great, the differential between conservation and development is impossible to meet with conservation dollars.

It seems as though we move ahead and backwards at the same time. We have record numbers of hybrids and alternative fuel vehicles on the road, and the sales of Hummers and SUVs continue to grow, in spite of the fact that the San Joaquin Valley is the most polluted air basin in the US.

In some places, lot sizes are decreasing and density is up, while infill is getting the most serious look in decades, but at the same time, zoning for ranchettes in the foothills is increasing in every county.

While land acquisition costs for conservation is increasingly prohibitive, new models are being created. I just returned from the Netherlands, where I saw a new model of river restoration, with public access to wide corridors along the Rhine River, and all the land was in private ownership. And the Sierra Nevada Conservancy—a new kind of conservancy—will consider economic and environmental needs of the range as it deals with protecting a treasured natural resource.

And while cities and counties are raising the volume, arguing for "Home Rule," California can actually take credit for some of the best and most significant regional planning in the nation—without regional government!

The NCCP in San Diego, Orange and Riverside Counties, completed a regional plan that included tens of thousands of acres of permanently conserved habitat and farmland, and identified areas for development. The remarkable thing about this effort is that it was driven by the private sector, and incentivized by the Endangered Species Act.

The Blueprint Project in the Sacramento Area (including Sacramento, Yolo, Yuba, Sutter, Placer and El Dorado Counties) undertook a successful look at land use and transportation in the region, driven by the imperative of massive investments in transportation to serve the needs of the growing region. The question now, of course, is whether or not it will "stick" without a legal or regulatory imperative....

And just a few months ago, Governor Schwarzenegger created the California Partnership with the San Joaquin Valley. The need in this region is enormous, the opportunity to have a significant impact on the future is huge – but the chances for success are still unclear. There is a lot of work to be done. Interestingly enough, Highway 99 has become the organizing device – a corridor that links the entire region, and then connects

eight counties to each other, and to the rest of the state. With a Highway 99 Task Force, the Great Valley Center has been able to begin a conversation about the future of the region in a way that everyone can understand and relate to. The highway doesn't begin or end in any jurisdiction—it is truly a regional facility. So now with a lot of community involvement around improving the highway, Caltrans has a Master Plan for the Highway, and there will be a Business Plan for its improvement completed by the end of the year, prioritizing the projects, estimating their cost, and identifying sources of funding for the next several years.

From the regional conversations around the highway, the region's supervisors focused more and more on a sense of region—one air basin, a common highway—we must be a region, and so in October, they adopted a set of Principles for a Sustainable San Joaquin Valley (attached to the end of this document), and these Principles will guide the discussions about land use, housing, agriculture and transportation that will take place under the auspices of the Governor's Partnership. And then there is the opportunity for the eight counties to coordinate through their COGs to do local land use and transportation plans that fit into the regional concepts and overlays. It's a big undertaking—but it is just possible that this will direct and shape the land use patterns in the San Joaquin Valley in such a way as to build healthy cities, save valuable natural resources, keep the agricultural industry healthy and provide jobs for a growing and diverse population. It's just possible that we are on the threshold of making a real difference.

The undertaking will be hard. There is no regulatory imperative forcing the discussion, on the other hand, it is a great opportunity. There aren't many regional discussions, and so it is relatively easy to keep the discussions focused and coordinated. While major investments in land are taking place in the region, the national homebuilders who are appearing on the scene for the first time in a major way are looking for a clear path. And the projections for growth, as well as the challenges of the region have focused a big spotlight on the Valley. There is a sense that the time is right to do something. (My personal view is that the time is right NOW, and if we fail, we won't get another chance.)

There are of course, risks, in this kind of process. The region, with all its diversity, has many small ethnic enclaves, and the risk is growing racial tension, or at least social balkanization. At the Great Valley Center, we use three pillars as the foundation for good decision making—Is EVERYONE at the table? Are we using the best available data? And, are we taking a long term view? Getting EVERYONE at the table may be the hardest of the three. Getting the growing cultural and ethnic groups to understand why this is important is a huge challenge.

Also contributing to the risk of success is the lack of resources. Small rural communities are hungry for growth, and not anxious to do anything to restrict, reshape or limit it, so they may come to the table reluctantly. And while the political leadership has been generally supportive, they are still watching to see what will happen. They are not yet committed to the process or to any particular outcome until they are certain that they are supported in their efforts.

So, how will we succeed at the hard, risky process we are about to undertake?

We have to build and strengthen a political mandate—a constituency for a more sustainable future. A public that demands better plans, a cleaner environment, more cohesive communities, a constituency for doing the right thing! And this is the hard part because it involves values, deferring short term profit for long term gain, understanding the legacy of generations—it involves believing in the possibility of the future.

And the only way to get there is to convince individuals that their own, personal choices are as important as those made by government. We all have to live the values that we espouse—“When the people lead, the leaders will follow.” We all have to believe in and accept that we each have a responsibility to the future....

When I was young, camping with the Girl Scouts in the wilderness, we learned not to pick the flowers, or even pick up pebbles along the path—because we wanted to leave everything for those who followed us. In fact, we were taught, we should leave things better than we found them.

I have been thinking about this in relation to my own life—our lives and our values, creating a different mindset—to move us to right track/right direction. Moving back to the right track will require each of us to make good choices, even if it means an occasional inconvenience.

I have 10 thoughts for living our lives in a way that will honor the land, and the planet and the things we hold dear. They are modest, not very big really, but if everyone did them, we might create a new political environment, and maybe even a better world.

Carol’s ten thoughts on moving toward sustainability:

1. Refill and re-use plastic water bottles, and think about how much land fill space we could save.
2. Refuse bags at check out stands when you really don’t need them. (Tuck that small item into your pocket or purse, and save the bag.)
3. Take your own cup into Starbuck’s—and save a nickel in the process, too!
4. Understand what is important in your life besides “wealth.”
5. Live in a right-sized house, on a right-sized lot.
6. Buy local food, and reduce the energy cost and consumption of distribution systems.
7. Check your investments: do they reflect your own values?
8. Reduce fuel consumption and walk or bicycle whenever possible.
9. Buy less stuff.
10. Resolve to leave the world a better place than you found it—and teach your kids to do the same.

Thank you for allowing me to be with you this morning.

The San Joaquin Valley Strategies for Sustainable Growth

On Thursday, the sixth day of October, 2005, the San Joaquin Valley Regional Association of California Counties endorsed the following basic principles:

In order to preserve and enhance the region's quality of life, growth should be accommodated in ways that use the region's agricultural, natural and financial resources efficiently, enhance the region's economic competitiveness, and ensure more certain and adequate funding for local government.

New growth should be located in or adjacent to existing communities.

Land use planning and development solutions should be regionally coordinated to encourage compact development and more efficient land use.

The best locations for placement of higher densities that are most effectively integrated into region-wide transportation opportunities should be identified regionally.

Premature or unnecessary conversion of prime or productive agricultural land should be avoided.

Incentives that link funding of regional transportation improvements to land development should be provided.

Policies to increase housing supply and affordability should be supported with policy and action.

Regional strategies should be developed to assure sufficient water supply and water quality.

Regional infrastructure needs should be collaboratively planned and include funding strategies.

A process which enables regular, ongoing conversation about issues of regional significance should be established and maintained.

The SJVRACC recognizes there are local conditions that may force exceptions but believes sustainable growth within the cities of the San Joaquin Valley requires a shared vision supported by common goals.

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