

Notice of Preparation

Date: November 22, 2021

To: Reference List of Recipients

From: Matt Fell, Deputy Director - Planning
Merced County Association of Governments - Lead Agency
369 West 18th Street, Merced, CA 95340
(209) 723-3153 ext. 128
matt.fell@mcagov.org

Subject: Notice of Preparation and Scoping Meeting for a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) 2022 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)

Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) will be the Lead Agency and will prepare a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the 2022 RTP/SCS. MCAG is requesting input regarding the scope and content of the environmental information, which is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project.

The project title, location, environmental review requirements, agency background and overview, project description, and probable environmental issues to be addressed in the PEIR are attached. An Initial Study is not attached and is not required pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15060(d).

Your response is requested at the earliest possible date, but not later than 30 days after receipt of this notice or by ***Monday, December 22, 2021***. Please send your response to Mr. Matt Fell, Deputy Director - Planning, at the office or email (preferred) address shown below. Please identify the name, phone number, and email address of a contact person at your agency.

By E-Mail	By Mail	By Facsimile
matt.fell@mcagov.org	369 West 18 th Street, Merced, CA 95340	209-723-0322

The project is of regional significance; therefore, in addition to your written comments provided, your verbal comments regarding preparation of the PEIR are also requested. A virtual scoping meeting will be held on ***December 2, 2021***, beginning at 1:30 PM via the Zoom platform at https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_ZxP3d3RxSHuqjQyVBfQQFg. Agency and/or public input can be provided in writing before or after the Scoping Meeting until December 22, 2021.

MCAG looks forward to receipt of your comments regarding this important project for our region.

Attachment

Notice of Preparation & Scoping Meeting

Program Environmental Impact Report

Project Overview and Scope of Environmental Analysis

2022 Regional Transportation Plan & Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)

November 22, 2021

Project Title

Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) 2022 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS).

Location

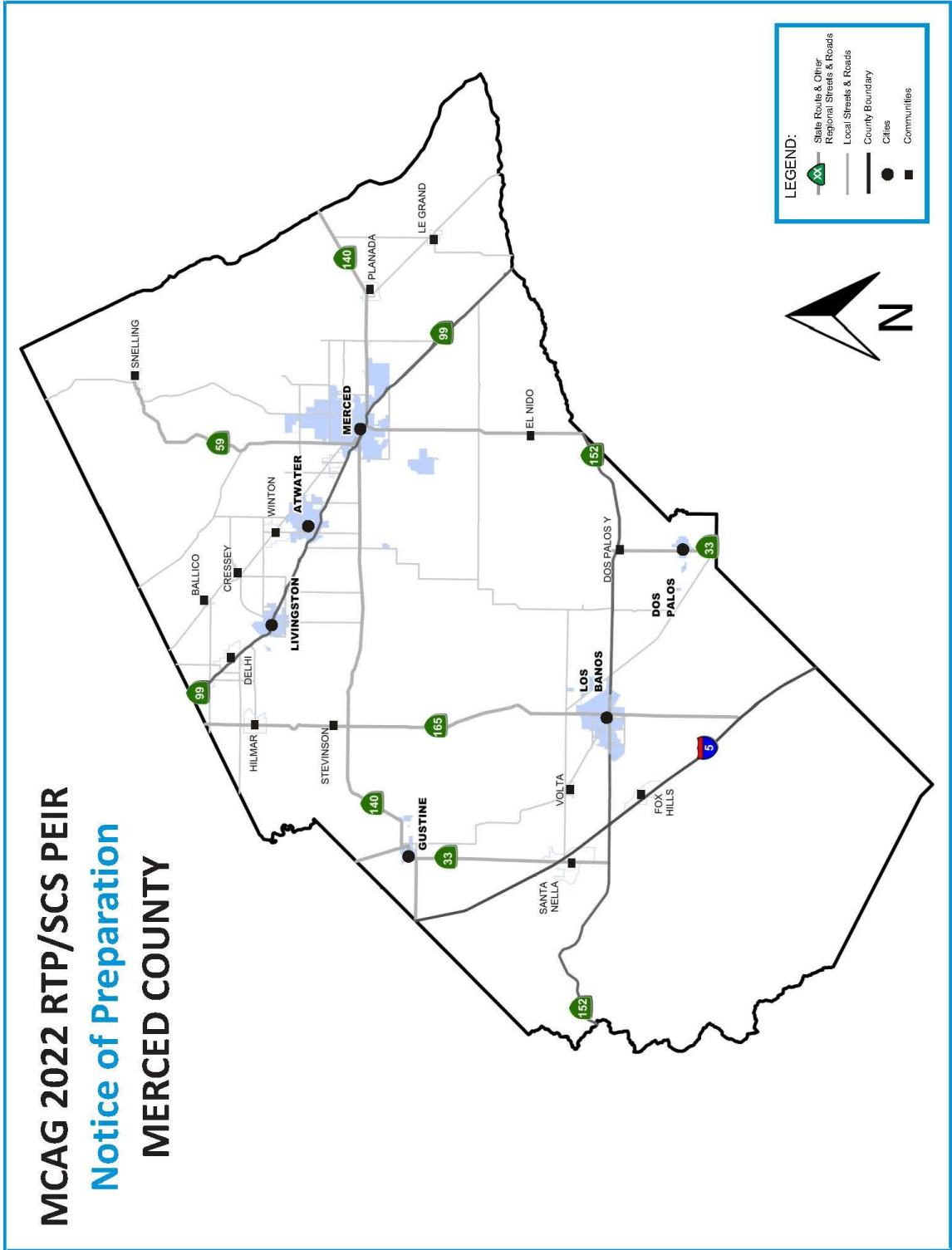
Within the corporate limits of Merced County, California, including the six (6) incorporated cities (Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos, and Merced) and all unincorporated areas under the jurisdiction of the County of Merced (reference the map of Merced County on the next page identifying the area to be addressed by the PEIR and the RTP/SCS). Located at the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley in Central California, Merced County encompasses 1,971 square miles of land. The county is bounded by Stanislaus County to the north, Mariposa County to the east, Madera, and Fresno counties to the south, and Santa Clara and San Benito counties to the west. The population in Merced County in 2010 was 255,793 according to the 2010 US Census. The California Department of Finance estimates that as of January 1, 2021, the population of Merced County was 284,836. Merced County is geographically the fifth largest county in the San Joaquin Valley region of California encompassing approximately 1,980 square miles.

CEQA Requirements

The RTP/SCS PEIR will be prepared in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and State CEQA Guidelines. CEQA requires public agencies, such as MCAG, to consider the potential environmental impacts of the proposed 2022 RTP/SCS. The objectives of CEQA are to:

- ✓ Disclose to the MCAG Board and the public the potential environmental impacts of the proposed RTP/SCS
- ✓ Propose feasible alternatives or mitigation measures that avoid, eliminate, or reduce project-related environmental effects
- ✓ Describe the analytical process, which leads to MCAG's decision on the project
- ✓ Promote interagency coordination
- ✓ Provide a mechanism for increasing public participation in the planning process

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The environmental document will be prepared as a “Programmatic” or “Program” EIR (PEIR), which is a type of first-tier document as defined in CEQA Guidelines Sections 15152 (Tiering) and 15168 (Program EIR). A Program EIR is prepared for an agency program or series of actions that can be characterized as one large project. Typically, such a project involves actions that are closely related geographically and are logical parts of a chain of contemplated events, rules, regulations, or plans that govern the conduct of a continuing program with generally similar environmental effects and mitigation measures. The RTP/SCS would be such a project.

It is noted that additional environmental analysis by local jurisdictions or other agencies of individual projects contained in the 2022 RTP/SCS may be required. The tiering concept is a multi-level approach to streamlining subsequent environmental reviews. This first-tier RTP/SCS PEIR will include an analysis of general matters (i.e., broad policies, the planned regional multi-modal transportation system and related impacts, and program-wide mitigation measures). Subsequent tiers prepared by local jurisdictions or other agencies (later EIRs and Negative Declarations) will include an analysis of narrower, subsequent projects by “incorporating by reference” the general discussions from the broader first-tier RTP/SCS PEIR. Second-tier environmental reviews will focus on the impacts of individual improvement projects that implement the RTP/SCS, related programs, and/or policy(ies).

Regional Planning Background and Overview

MCAG is a voluntary association of local governments and is one of California’s 38 regional transportation planning agencies (RTPAs). MCAG was created in 1967 through a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) composed of elected officials of Merced County and its six (6) incorporated cities. In addition, MCAG is a designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which qualifies it for Federal transportation funding as identified in Title 23 U.S.C. Section 134 and Title 23 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 450.300. MPOs are federally designated while the State designated RTPAs are described under California Government Code Section 29532 et seq. MCAG is both an MPO and an RTPA.

As part of the regional transportation planning process, MCAG studies potential transportation improvements, forecasts future conditions and needs, and pools the planning resources and expertise of its member agencies to facilitate development of a shared strategic vision for transportation and development in the region. These responsibilities enable MCAG to fulfill federal and State planning requirements and maintain the eligibility of the Merced region for federal and State funding for transportation planning and improvements.

According to the 2017 California Regional Transportation Planning Guidelines, prepared by the California Transportation Commission (CTC), MCAG is required to adopt and submit an updated RTP to the CTC and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) every four (4) years. The 2022 RTP is a planning document to be developed by MCAG in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Caltrans and other stakeholders, including transportation system users. Following the passage of *Assembly Bill 32 (AB 32) – The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006*, which specifies that by the year 2020, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within the State must be at 1990 levels, *Senate Bill 375 (SB 375) – The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008* was signed into law

as the framework for achieving greenhouse gas emissions reductions from land use and transportation planning.

SB 375 includes four (4) primary findings related to the RTP/SCS development process:

- ✓ That the California Air Resource Board (ARB) develop regional GHG emission reduction targets for cars and light trucks for each of the 18 MPOs in California, including MCAG
- ✓ That MCAG, during the next RTP update, is required to prepare an SCS that specifies how the GHG emissions reduction target set by ARB will be achieved. If the target cannot be met through the SCS, then an Alternative Planning Strategy (APS) shall be prepared by MCAG
- ✓ Streamlines CEQA requirements for specific residential and mixed-use developments that are consistent with the Merced County SCS or APS (as determined by ARB) to achieve the regional GHG emissions reduction target
- ✓ Requires that MCAG conduct the Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) process consistent with the RTP/SCS process and that the RHNA allocations be consistent with the development pattern in the SCS

Project Description

The project, as defined pursuant to Public Resources Code, Section 21065, is the preparation of the 2022 RTP/SCS. MCAG is in the process of preparing the RTP/SCS as required by Section 65080 et seq., of Chapter 2.5 of the California Government Code, federal guidelines pursuant to new requirements established in the federal surface transportation reauthorization, “Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century” (MAP-21) and the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Acts, Transportation Conformity for the Air Quality Attainment Plan per 40 CFR Part 51 and 40 CFR Part 93, and requirements set forth in *Assembly Bill 32, The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006*, and *Senate Bill 375 The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008*. Finally, the California Transportation Commission (CTC) has prepared guidelines (most recently adopted by the CTC on January 18, 2017) to assist in the preparation of the RTP/SCS.

The last comprehensive EIR on the RTP/SCS was completed in August 2018, which addressed transportation improvement projects, programs, and funding sources.

The 2022 RTP/SCS will address all transportation modes including motor vehicles, transit (commuter and local), rail (commuter and interregional), goods movement (rail freight and trucking), bicycle and pedestrian facilities, aviation systems, and transportation systems management (TSM) programs and projects considering the horizon year of 2046. In addition, the 2022 RTP/SCS will:

- ✓ Identify the region’s transportation goals, objectives, and policies
- ✓ Include the SCS, which demonstrates how the region will meet its GHG reduction targets (currently being discussed by the California Air Resources Board and the eight (8) San Joaquin Valley Regional Transportation Planning Agencies) through integrated land use, and housing and transportation planning. *Once adopted by MCAG, the SCS becomes an integral part of the RTP*

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- ✓ Set forth an action plan of projects and programs to address the needs consistent with the Policy Element such as:
 - Provide a good system of roads that are well maintained, safe, efficient, and meet the transportation demands of people and freight
 - Provide a transit system that is a viable choice
 - Support full-time employment with livable wages – i.e., support job creation & economic vitality
 - Preserve productive agricultural land/maintain strong agricultural economy and the quality of life that goes with it
 - Support orderly and planned growth that enhances the integration and connectivity of various modes of transportation
 - Support clean air and water and avoid, minimize, or mitigate negative impacts to the environment
 - Identify and allocate funding and resources for building, operating, and maintaining the existing and future regional transportation system and ensure that transportation investments are cost-effective
- ✓ Assess current modes of transportation
- ✓ Predict future transportation needs
- ✓ Propose solutions to current and future transportation problems
- ✓ Detail the financial resources needed to implement the RTP/SCS
- ✓ Be consistent with related plans and activities
- ✓ Involve the public
- ✓ Coordinate with other government agencies
- ✓ Provide enough detail on proposed projects to assist with the:
 - Development of capital improvement programs
 - Identification of a transportation project’s purpose and need
 - Environmentally review transportation projects
 - Estimate emission impacts of transportation projects for air quality conformity
 - Decisions related to land use development and growth

Specifically, the RTP/SCS will include the following sections, which may be reorganized or modified:

Chapters:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Executive Summary | 7. Scenario Development |
| 2. Introduction | 8. Scenario Evaluation |
| 3. Existing Conditions | 9. Action Plan |
| 4. System Preservation | 10. Environmental Justice |
| 5. Future Conditions | 11. Public Participation |
| 6. Investment Plan | |

Appendices:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A. Adoption Resolution | D. SJV Interregional Goods Movement |
| B. Response to Comments | E. RTP Checklist |
| C. Public Notices | |

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|---|--|
| F. Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Report | O. Public Participation Plans |
| G. Air Quality Conformity Analysis | P. Public Engagement |
| H. Glossary of Terms | Q. Environmental Justice Analysis |
| I. Financial Revenue | R. Regional Housing Needs Plan |
| J. Regional Demographic Forecast | S. Transportation Development Act Fare Box Recovery Ratios |
| K. Tier I and Tier II Project List | T. Operational Analysis |
| L. Goal, Performance Measures, and Results | U. Valleywide Chapter |
| M. Travel Demand Model Validation Report | V. Roadway Functional Classification Maps |
| N. Scenario Development Overview | W. Transit Service Area Maps |
| | X. MCAG SB 375 Methodology |
| | Y. System Performance Report |

Preliminary 2022 RTP Project Alternatives & SCS Alternative Scenarios

The following preliminary project alternatives will be addressed in the 2022 RTP/SCS PEIR or revised depending upon local agency and public outreach and input:

- ✓ No Project
- ✓ Scenario 1. Compact Development/Business as Usual
- ✓ Scenario 2. Preferred Scenario/Infill Emphasis
- ✓ Scenario 3. Jobs-Housing Balance
- ✓ Scenario 4. Transit Priority Corridors

CEQA Streamlining (SB 375 and SB 226)

SB 375 and newly enacted SB 226 provide “exemptions” for certain types of projects from CEQA review or projects may qualify for streamlined review if they conform to the regional SCS or the APS (if applicable). Projects qualify for streamlined CEQA review even if they conflict with local plans following adoption of the SCS.

Environmental Issues to be Addressed in the PEIR

The programs and projects to be included in the 2022 RTP/SCS will be analyzed through development of the PEIR. This will allow MCAG to analyze the regional or general impacts of the programs and projects. A more detailed or project level environmental assessment (if required) of the various projects included in the RTP/SCS will be conducted by the various responsible agencies including Caltrans, Merced County, and the cities within the Merced region before the projects are approved for construction and implementation.

Potential environmental impacts that could result from the Project include project impacts to:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ Aesthetics | ✓ Biological Resources |
| ✓ Agricultural and Forestry Resources | ✓ Climate Change |
| ✓ Air Quality | |

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- ✓ Cultural Resources & Tribal Cultural Resources
- ✓ Energy and Energy Conservation
- ✓ Geology/Soils/Mineral Resources
- ✓ Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- ✓ Hydrology and Water Quality
- ✓ Land Use, Planning, and Recreation
- ✓ Noise and Vibration
- ✓ Population, Housing, and Employment
- ✓ Public Utilities, Other Utilities, and Services Systems
- ✓ Social and Economic Effects
- ✓ Transportation/Traffic in accordance with SB 743
- ✓ Wildfire
- ✓ Alternatives (noted above), Cumulative Effects, Growth Inducing Impacts, and Other Issues required by CEQA
- ✓ Mandatory Findings of Significance

Prepared by: Georgiena M. Vivian, President
VRPA Technologies, Inc.
November 22, 2021

Date: November 22, 2021

DocuSigned by:
Stacie Guzman
Signature: E5090DD982C74E3
Stacie Guzman

Title: Executive Director

Phone: (209) 723-3153