

Fresno County leaders talk about more walking, biking

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By George Hostetter

Government and civic leaders on Thursday used a new phrase -- "active transportation" -- to spur an old way of getting around.

The aim is to get people throughout Fresno County to do more walking and bicycling.

More than 20 people met in downtown Fresno for the kick-off meeting of the Regional Active Transportation Plan.

"Active transportation" is bureaucracy's way of describing the art of getting from Point A to Point B on your own power. That typically means hoofing it or hopping on a bicycle.

"We want to give everybody more transportation options," COG planner Lindsey Monge-Chargin said after the meeting. "You might decide to walk to a bus stop instead of taking your car to work. And there's the health aspect. If you're walking or bicycling, skateboarding or rollerblading, whatever it might be, you're definitely improving your health."

Everyone at the meeting had a handle on the basics.

The federal and state governments are keen on getting people into the exercise mode. "Active transportation" is their new favorite phrase.

The feds and state have a powerful carrot -- planning money for agencies and groups located closer to the people. COG has set aside \$150,000 of its own money to fund the writing of a county-wide active transportation plan. The state is adding another \$150,000.

But it seemed everyone at the meeting also understood the challenge: A plan for who, what, when, where?

Fresno County settlements stretch from Firebaugh in the north to Kingsburg in the south, from Coalinga in the west to Shaver Lake in the east. There's plenty of civilization in between.

There's no end to ideas for getting people to walk, bicycle and rollerblade more -- especially if turning dream into reality is funded with someone else's money.

Thursday's meeting let stakeholders do some freewheeling chatter on the immensity of their mission. Uncertainty was the common theme.

An advisory committee is key to the process. Volunteers will be sought later.

Bicyclists, always chasing more bike paths and routes, appear well represented. Pedestrian advocates, if any exist, were AWOL.

The feds and the state will insist on measurements of success. No one knew how to gauge the rise or fall of foot traffic on Mariposa Mall or downtown Selma.

Then there's the age-old problem of government redundancy. The city of Fresno, for example, already has plans that encourage walking and bicycling. No one wants to deliver a plan that, in the words of Fresno

Public Works Director Scott Mozier, "reinvents the wheel."

If all goes well, Monge-Chargin said, a plan will emerge with solid "active transportation" ideas. The presence of those ideas in a plan vetted by stakeholders can only encourage grant-dispensers further up the government food chain, she said.

Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case McNairy told COG officials and their allies to get moving. She said there are lots of aging Baby Boomers out there.

"They want to be active," she said.

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