What's in it for smaller cities?

The Metro Rural Loop concept and proposal provides unique solutions to addressing easier-said-than-done problems facing the Valley: how to bolster the region's economy and effectively deal with vehicle transportation costs, congestion, safety and access.

BRIAN NAKAMURA

Everyone is aware that transportation issues are complex and sometimes conflicting, as statistics show average daily commute travel to and from work are increasing. And yet, with gasoline and diesel fuel prices at an all-time high, there are more travelers on America's highways and roads.

Preserving ag areas

The Metro Rural Loop may reduce the need for existing highway and rural road expansion, preserving the region's agricultural areas. Residential, commercial and industrial developments can be focused near the loop, again preserving the region's agriculture economy.

And, a loop may be a solution that concentrates traffic, which may provide more safety for drivers of agricultural equipment and vehicles on rural roads as well as address critical traffic congestion and air quality issues.

Why? First and foremost, the Metro Rural Loop would provide a unique opportunity for one of the fastest-growing regions in the state to actually design, develop and use a transportation system that allows for and accommodates accessibility.

Accessibility, in simple economic terms, means the ability to move raw materials, final products and most important, people. The age-old adage, "Time is money," can be quantified in deliveries of goods and services and availability of a quality work force.

Just as important, for a small, rural city such as Reedley, which is more than 12 miles east of state Highway 99, the Metro Rural Loop could make all the difference in the world when an employer determines where to locate his or her business.

Time is money

This same principle applies to the cities of Dinuba, Parlier, Porterville, Orange Cove, Huron, Coalinga and all other rural communities in the region. Again, because goods movement and employee base plays a major role in the decision making process, accessibility addresses the "time is money" factor.

The Metro Rural Loop may have many benefits not realized in today's efforts to resolve critical transportation needs and impacts.

The loop is clearly an innovative opportunity that has the ability to enhance the region's economy by providing more efficient and timely access to and from urban and rural areas.

▶ Brian Nakamura is Reedley city manager. He can be reached at bnakamura@reedley.com.

OUR BLOG

"Opinion Talk," the blog by The Bee's Opinion page staffers, is on fresnobee.com, The Bee's Web site. Go to Opinions and click on Opinion Talk. The blog is another way for you to connect with us on the issues of the day, serious and otherwise. Please pay a visit and let us know what you think.

Loop: 'It's now or never' for it

Continued from Page J1

purpose in a regional framework that unites everyone in a larger milieu.

That regional perspective may be the best thing about the growing discussion about the Metro Rural Loop. All 17 cities in the two counties, and the county governments themselves, have signed onto the process and have representatives participating in the discussion. So have farmland preservation people, such as the American Farmland Trust, and members of the development industry. Farmers are represented, and a wide array of others.

That's crucial. John Wright, Clovis' planning director, speaks of the need to design a "long-range, urban-form metro area" that is coherent as a region, and "not done by default" in a piecemeal fashion. Keith Bergthold, assistant planning director for Fresno and a driving force behind the loop concept, says that over the "last 50 years, cities are not the economic unit — it's the region." He speaks of the Metro Rural Loop idea as giving us "permission to speak regionally."

That makes abundant sense. The issues we face are rarely confined to one neighborhood or one city. Transportation is a regional issue. So are water availability and air quality. Economic development is — or should be — a regional issue. "It's not a zero-sum game," said Clovis' Wright.

If we improve air quality, we improve it for all of us. Similarly, if good new jobs are created in Madera, that's good for Fresno. If the same thing happens in Reedley, that's good for Clovis. We are neither defined nor limited by the artificial lines on maps that separate us into all these different jurisdictions.

How we got to where we are is instructional. Cities began to sprawl almost as soon as World War II ended. Returning GI's had given much to their country, and they wanted families, jobs and homes upon their return — and right away. The Baby Boom is evidence that they got the first. The postwar economic boom provided the jobs, and the GI Bill paid for the training to do those jobs. The returning veterans found their homes in the suburbs.

The suburbs were born to alleviate a severe housing crisis. The techniques of the assembly line, which worked so well cranking out the implements of victory, were applied to vast tracts of cheap land at the edges of existing cities, and houses sprang up everywhere, it seemed.

The whole thing was stitched together by the automobile.

It made a great deal of sense then. Today, increasingly, it doesn't work. The sprawl kept advancing outward, so that we now speak of "first-ring suburbs," those postwar developments, which are now closer to the original city cores than the newer, more distant "edge cities," as journalist and author Joel Garreau calls them in his book, "Edge City: Life on the New Frontier."

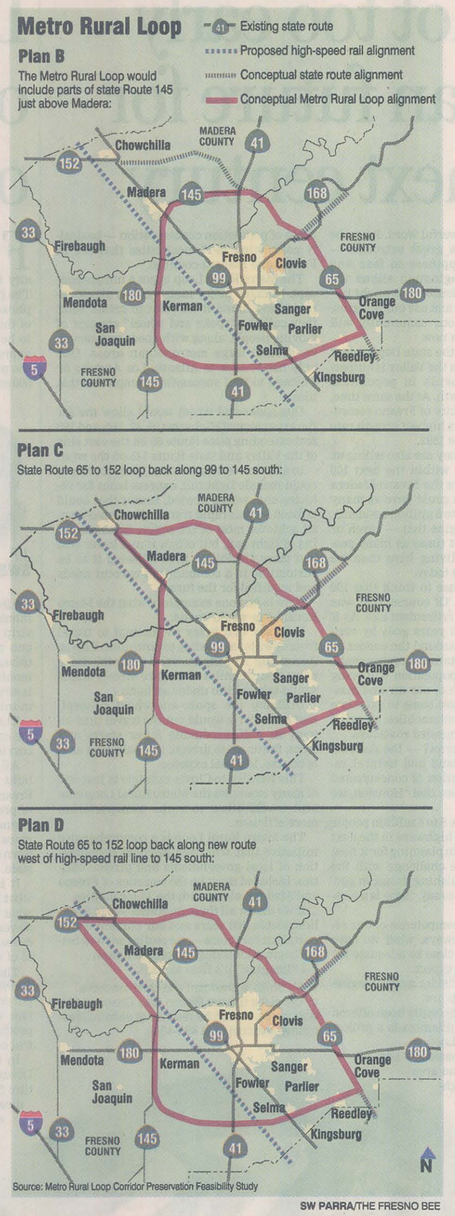
Congestion and pollution are the result. So is alienation. Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton, in their book "The Regional City," put it this way: "We are becoming socially more segregated — now by interest, access and geography as well as income, age and race."

And we are further segregating ourselves even in our isolated communities. Calthorpe and Fulton again: "Even within the more highly segregated developments of today, there is less common ground, less civic space to bring even their homogenous populations together. We leave home in a car and travel to remote workplaces. Without the simple act of walking in our neighborhoods or having something of a common destination, it is little wonder that we know our neighbors less and less. We communicate on the Internet but not on the street."

Not everyone will like what they see in the Metro Rural Loop. Environmentalists and conservationists, among others, are sure to be aghast at the idea of upgrading Highway 65, along the east side of the Valley, into a freeway — even a freeway of the future. And others will cling to the postwar dream of the detached single-family residence in the suburbs.

But many will seize the opportunity. Fresno-area builder Kevin Castanos, an active participant in the loop discussion, says "the bias against [higher] densities will vanish" over time. Castanos adds: "Creating a plan for our whole region — that's the most important work in our lifetime."

And it's work that needs to begin right away. To that end, the group examining the Metro Rural Loop has won a grant from the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, the agency set up by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to boost this region's future. The grant will fund feasibility studies.



SW PARRA/THE FRESNO BEE

This discussion has begun at precisely the right time. James Hallowell, the local businessman and philanthropist — and backer of the loop effort — put it this way: "It's now or never." We still have time to plan a prosperous region that is also coherent, clean and eminently livable. If we don't create a regional plan that looks out a century ahead, we may be condemning our children, and theirs, to a very bleak landscape.

▶ Russ Minick is The Bee's deputy editorial page editor. He can be reached at 441-6343 or rminick@fresnobee.com.

Setting 50-year plans

It's no secret that Fresno County is growing. The population of Fresno County is approximately 900,000 and projections are that by 2050, the population will be nearly 1.7 million.

KIRK HUNTER

But the truth is the entire San Joaquin Valley is growing. The population of the Valley is expected to grow from 3.3 million in 2000 to nearly 8 million by 2050. The one fact that is undeniable, like it or not — growth is going to happen. Given this fact, we, the current residents of the Valley and more specifically Fresno County, have a responsibility to take a proactive role in planning for and managing this anticipated growth. The Metro Rural Loop is one way to meet this responsibility.

In 2005, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger acknowledged the impending growth of the Valley by initiating the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. The goal of the partnership is to achieve a prosperous economy, quality environment and social equity for the entire region. The state also funded a series of regional blueprint planning programs throughout California. Through this program, the eight counties that comprise the Valley are in the process of planning for growth out to the year 2050.

Unprecedented

Each of the eight counties is working on its piece of the project and will forward input to the Blueprint Regional Advisory Committee, which will ultimately synthesize the data into the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint — a vision for the future of the Valley's growth. This unprecedented collaboration will provide the opportunity to think beyond county boundaries and address issues of sustainable development.

Last year the Fresno Council of Governments (COG) formed the Fresno Blueprint Roundtable, which I chair. The charge of this committee is to develop a blueprint for the Fresno region through 2050. The roundtable comprises 32 residents of Fresno County who are committed to ensuring that we take full advantage of available data and technology as we develop a vision for our future of Fresno.

One scenario that will be considered and modeled by the committee is the Metro Rural Loop. The loop is a creative approach that incorporates multi-city, multi-county and multi-modal transportation to connect 15-17 cities in Fresno and Madera counties.

Wide corridors

The foundation of the loop is wide, interconnecting transportation corridors augmented by coordinated regional land-use policies that would be adopted by local governments. These policies would embrace and implement designs that promote efficient use of land and multi-modal transportation options. These "smart growth" decisions will further stimulate a vibrant economy and establish a real and sensible plan for the protection of agricultural land and natural resources.

The loop is a great start to the scenario planning currently under way by the blueprint planning process.

The roundtable will conduct public outreach activities to discuss the scenarios for the future and seek input. Information on the blueprint can be found on COG's Web site at www.fresnocog.org.

▶ Kirk Hunter, chairman of the Fresno Blueprint Roundtable Committee, is CEO of the Southwest Education Support Center in Caruthers. He can be reached at khunter@southwestjpa.org or by calling 644-1019.

Route tests region's collaboration

Since 2000, the Fresno community has been building a network of civic entrepreneurs committed to acting in accordance with 10 principles.

Those involved recognize and take action based upon a deep knowledge that our fates are intertwined. Our work on the Metro Rural Loop is a result of that understanding.

DEBORAH J. NANKIVELL

As the seminal quote in our first community collaborative, "A Landscape of Choice: Strategies for Improving Patterns of Community Growth" noted, "A community is an economy: the two are one and the same ... a web of practical interrelationships between neighbors who understand their mutual dependency and honor it by competently caring for their work, their town, their offspring, and each other," a quote from James Howard Kunstler in "The Geography of Nowhere."

The Metro Rural Loop, a plan to bring concepts from "A Landscape of Choice" to the ground where decisions must be made and actions taken, will test both our integrity and capacity as a community. The leaders of this effort — Keith Bergthold, John Wright and Kevin Castanos — have earned the trust and respect of people from every sector. They are seasoned leaders with expertise in land use and community building.

We have paid a huge price for past land-use decisions. They damaged our trust in one another and left wounds upon the land and in our social fabric that are reflected in our economy, neighborhoods, schools and jails. The quality of our community is up to us. Let's create one that is held up as a role model across the globe.

When the Growth Alternative Alliance issued "A Landscape of Choice" in 1998, we had very little social or civic capacity. The alliance was a partnership between the Fresno Business Council, Chamber of Commerce, Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust and the Building Industry Association, but we did not have the relationships or tools necessary to execute the plan.

Not ready for the challenge

Agreement in concept is relatively easy. A commitment to shared strategies and the willingness to take action and invest resources is not. Implementation requires the willingness to collaborate. Collaboration is the tougher and messier way people choose when they finally accept that the results sought can only be achieved by working together.

Working together requires all members of the team to take responsibility for their parts, based upon their talent and resources. We weren't ready for such a challenge in 1998. We lacked the trust — social capital — and the skills — civic capacity — to get the job done.

Together, we drafted a list of community values. They are stewardship, boundary crossing and collaboration, commitment to outcomes, art-of-the-possible thinking, fact-based decision making, truth telling, power parity, commitment to resolving conflict, asset-based approach and disclosure of conflict of interest. Today, the list has been endorsed by most major organizations in the community, including, just recently, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

Those engaged in the work to transform our community are committed to abiding by them in the civic sector. The Regional Jobs Initiative, Choosing Our Future at Fresno Unified School District and the Human Investment Initiatives are all examples of the power of collaboration behind comprehensive, integrated strategies. We are steadily building the social capital we will need to meet the challenges of this century.

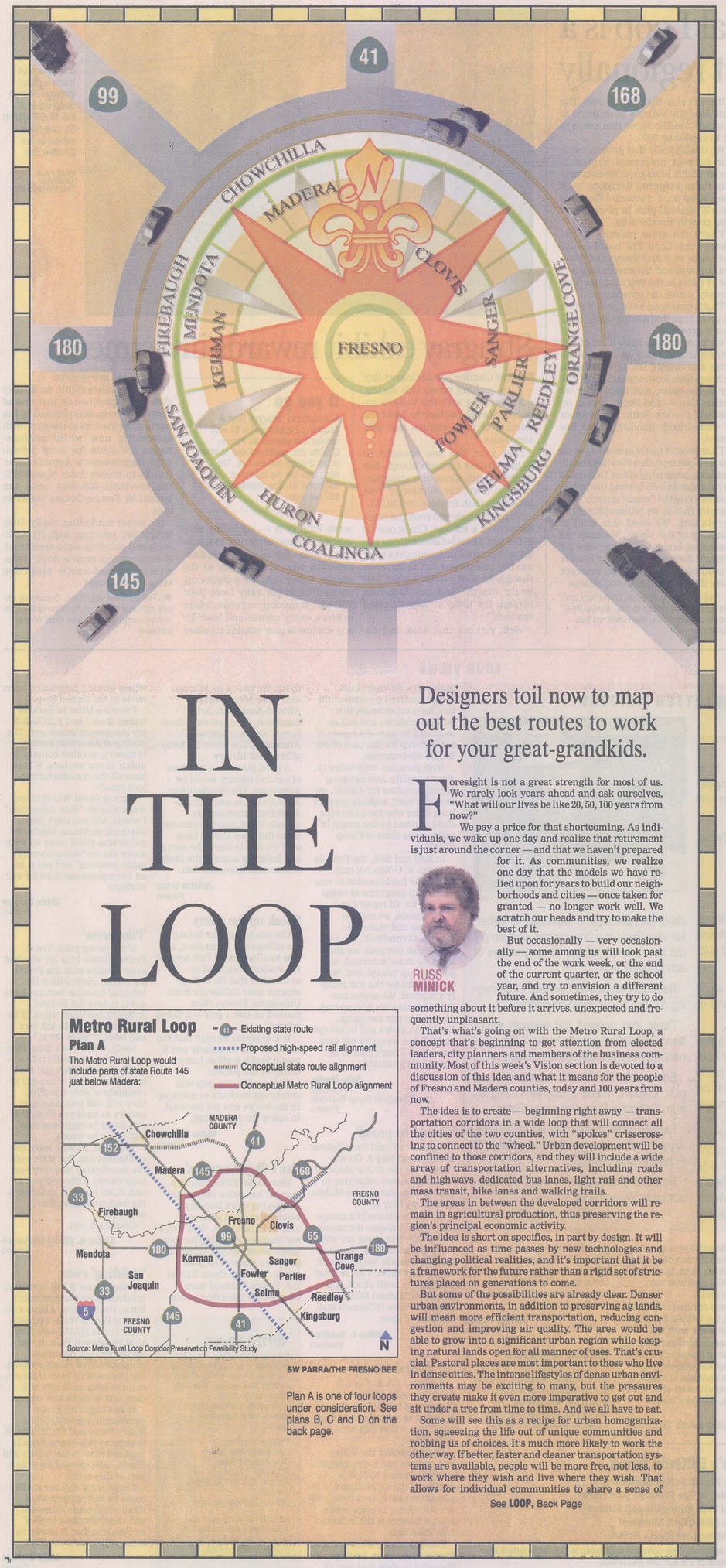
In addition, hundreds of people have taken on the mantle of civic entrepreneur. They have gained the substantive knowledge and learned the skills necessary to make a difference in their communities. They know that the price of living in a free country is steep. Because we tend to focus on our rights, far too many of us have shirked our corresponding responsibility to make a contribution.

Today, we have the civic capacity to take on issues that used to divide and frustrate us. While we can buy intellectual capital and attract money, we must build social and civic capacity ourselves.

▶ Deborah J. Nankivell is the chief executive officer of the Fresno Business Council. She can be reached at Deborah.Nankivell@fresnobc.org or 449-6398.

Vision

How would the Metro Rural Loop affect ag, business, the environment, mass transit and small cities? **INSIDE, J3 and J4**



IN THE LOOP

Designers toil now to map out the best routes to work for your great-grandkids.

Foresight is not a great strength for most of us. We rarely look years ahead and ask ourselves, "What will our lives be like 20, 50, 100 years from now?"

We pay a price for that shortcoming. As individuals, we wake up one day and realize that retirement is just around the corner — and that we haven't prepared for it. As communities, we realize one day that the models we have relied upon for years to build our neighborhoods and cities — once taken for granted — no longer work well. We scratch our heads and try to make the best of it.

RUSS MINICK

But occasionally — very occasionally — some among us will look past the end of the work week, or the end of the current quarter, or the school year, and try to envision a different future. And sometimes, they try to do something about it before it arrives, unexpected and frequently unpleasant.

That's what's going on with the Metro Rural Loop, a concept that's beginning to get attention from elected leaders, city planners and members of the business community. Most of this week's Vision section is devoted to a discussion of this idea and what it means for the people of Fresno and Madera counties, today and 100 years from now.

The idea is to create — beginning right away — transportation corridors in a wide loop that will connect all the cities of the two counties, with "spokes" crisscrossing to connect to the "wheel." Urban development will be confined to those corridors, and they will include a wide array of transportation alternatives, including roads and highways, dedicated bus lanes, light rail and other mass transit, bike lanes and walking trails.

The areas in between the developed corridors will remain in agricultural production, thus preserving the region's principal economic activity.

The idea is short on specifics, in part by design. It will be influenced as time passes by new technologies and changing political realities, and it's important that it be a framework for the future rather than a rigid set of strictures placed on generations to come.

But some of the possibilities are already clear. Denser urban environments, in addition to preserving ag lands, will mean more efficient transportation, reducing congestion and improving air quality. The area would be able to grow into a significant urban region while keeping natural lands open for all manner of uses. That's crucial: Pastoral places are most important to those who live in dense cities. The intense lifestyles of dense urban environments may be exciting to many, but the pressures they create make it even more imperative to get out and sit under a tree from time to time. And we all have to eat.

Some will see this as a recipe for urban homogenization, squeezing the life out of unique communities and robbing us of choices. It's much more likely to work the other way. If better, faster and cleaner transportation systems are available, people will be more free, not less, to work where they wish and live where they wish. That allows for individual communities to share a sense of

See LOOP, Back Page

SW PARRA/THE FRESNO BEE

Plan A is one of four loops under consideration. See plans B, C and D on the back page.

French leaders live intriguing, devious lives

PARIS — The French can be very, well, French when it comes to the personal lives of their leaders. They take affairs, illegitimate children and tumultuous marriages in stride.

But they suddenly turn traditional when it comes to the role of the first lady. They do not like the idea of Nicolas Sarkozy entertaining world leaders alone at the Elysee Palace. It is not *comme il faut* (proper).

Maybe that's why this country is so mesmerized with the question of whether the beautiful Cecilia Sarkozy, a former Schiaparelli model who was for years her husband's close political aide, is going to serve as the *chatelain* of the Elysee, or run off again with a lover.

MAUREEN DOWD

No one seems sure if she will bolt, leaving the entertaining duties to Sarko's mother, an elegant lawyer, or agree to play a limited role.

"We have a hard time imagining an intermittent first lady at the Elysee," sniffed Le Temps, a daily newspaper, online.

Cecilia was missing in action during the final weeks of her husband's campaign. "I don't see myself as first lady," the 49-year-old said in 2005. "That bores me."

Trying to fathom what is going on with power couples here is like watching a French movie — scenes brimming with emotion and ambiguity.

Cecilia left Sarko for several months in 2005, moving to America to live with a French communications consultant — reportedly a response to her husband's affair with a French journalist.

When Paris Match published pictures of Cecilia with her lover in New York, Sarko became furious with his good friend, Arnaud Lagardere, the magazine's owner. Soon, the editor was fired.

Lagardere stepped in again to kill a story in another publication he owns, *Le Journal du Dimanche.* Last Sunday, the paper was going to reveal that Cecilia did not bother to vote.

On the night Sarko won the presidency, Parisians were watching Cecilia's every move. She was not there when he won or when he made his acceptance speech, and some of her friends were saying that the marriage was over.

But her two pretty, blonde daughters from a previous marriage apparently prevailed on her to show up later that night at a victory rally. She came dressed down in a gray sweater and white slacks and looked distracted as her husband spoke.

At the post-rally party, Paris Match — now following the Sarko script — was given an exclusive on their happy reunion. They were in a hotel suite, the magazine said, behaving "like lovers." "In front of all their friends reunited," the story said, "he dances for a single person: Cecilia." When Paris isn't fixated on Cecilia and Sarko, it's buzzing about the town's other power couple.

As Segolene Royal builds on her strong showing to become the Socialist candidate for president in 2012, her relationship with the father of her four children and the head of her party, Francois Hollande, grows byzantine.

She scooted past Hollande — who wanted to run himself — and now she wants to eclipse him totally. This competition — the opposite of the Bill-Hillary partnership — certainly did not help her candidacy. "Every morning I would open the newspapers and ask myself which Socialist was going to attack me over what I was saying," she told a Socialist conference the other day.

Their relationship is the subject of a new book, *"La Femme Fatale,"* by two respected political reporters from *Le Monde.* The couple is suing to have some passages cut.

"Disappointed in her private life, she chose to go into battle without worrying anymore about François Hollande, but also with the assertion that she was more popular than him, and he hadn't been able to renovate the Socialist Party despite hopes of party activists and elected officials," Raphaelle Bacque, a co-author, told a journalist, noting that the fact that Sego and Hollande were at each other's throats, while keeping their status a mystery, had "serious political consequences. They should have been unbeatable. Him at the head of the party, her a candidate. But instead we saw two teams in endless competition."

The book quotes an interview in which Hollande was asked where he would live if Sego won. "At my house!" he replied.

▶ Maureen Dowd is a columnist with the New York Times Syndicate (122 E. 42nd St. 14th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10168).

Opinion

THE FRESNO BEE — FOUNDED IN 1922 BY CARLOS K. MCCLATCHY

OUR VIEWS

Metro Rural Loop is a chance to act regionally

Concept has much promise, deserves close examination.

The people now working to pull together the concept known as the Metro Rural Loop are asking a lot of fundamental questions: What will this region look like in 50 years? A hundred years? What do we *want* it to look like? How many of us will there be? Will we still have a thriving agricultural sector in our economy? Will we have development that can fill our needs without filling the entire countryside?

The loop concept envisions corridors running like a big wheel in a wide circle around the metropolitan Fresno-Clovis area, connected by spokes along the existing Freeways 41, 168 and 180. The transportation corridors would be "multi-modal," which is planner-speak for having lots of choices: roads, rails, buses, trails and bike lanes, all running through the wheel and spokes.

The people involved in the loop think we can find good answers to all those questions, and we hope they're right. Much is riding on the decisions we make about transportation, housing, economic development and environmental concerns in the next few years.

It's important to have this discussion now, because, as one participant put it, "The stars have aligned" for an effort to come up with new ideas for the future. The region still has an opportunity to redefine itself before turning into a smoggier version of the San Fernando Valley. "The canvas is still white," said another participant.

It won't stay that way forever. The San Joaquin Valley's population is around 3.3 million now; that's expected to double by 2050.

We can't handle that growth using our current piecemeal approach, under which local governments usually make planning decisions as if they lived in a vacuum. We must have a regional plan in place before that growth smothers us.

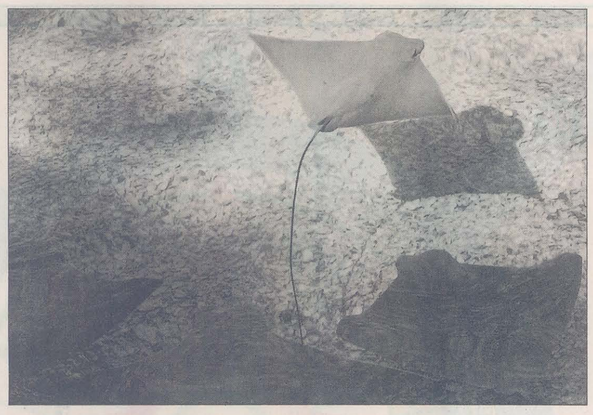
That's the great promise of the Metro Rural Loop. The boards of supervisors in both Fresno and Madera counties and the governments of the 17 cities in the two counties have already joined the process.

That's unprecedented, and it gives us great hope that a sense of regionalism is growing.

We have to have that. Most of our problems don't stop at city boundaries and county lines. We're all in this together, from one end of the Valley to the other, and the sooner we realize that — and begin to plan on that basis — the better our chances of successfully handling what lies ahead.

There aren't many specifics yet on the loop concept; that also lies ahead. But it's a promising effort that could pay dividends well beyond the implementation of the "smart growth" philosophy that is its philosophical underpinning. We need this kind of thinking in the Valley. We have the resources, human and otherwise, for a bright future. All we really need is a good plan. We hope that emerges from the Metro Rural Loop debate.

▶ Tell us what you think. Comment on this editorial by going to http://www.fresnobee.com/opinion, then click on the editorial.



One of 16 cownose rays leads a group through 24-inch deep water at the 14,500 gallon Stingray Bay exhibit at the Chaffee Zoo.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA/ THE FRESNO BEE

Stingray exhibit rewards investment

The Chaffee Zoo's Stingray Bay is making waves this spring, working with the Valley's exquisite spring weather to boost the number of park visitors and gift-shop sales.

Last year, the zoo brought in 63,800 visitors through March, but in the month since the stingrays came to town, the number of visitors more than doubled, to 129,517.

No matter how you cook the numbers, that's a success. Chalk one up to the city's true believers, those voters who stepped up to support a community investment in the zoo even though it was criticized for not being "north" and not high-tech enough for today's "sophisticated families."

Well, rethink that idea and observe Exhibit A — squealing children of all ages delighting in touching these fascinating elasmobranchs, who are cousins to the sharks. Valley families embrace opportunities to get away from their TV and computer screens, adore critters, enjoy nature and look for any excuse to play outside together during these balmy days.

This traveling exhibit, on display through September, is just one of many improvements planned by the zoo to draw visitors to the park with something new while arrangements are made for more permanent improvements coming later, thanks to money from Measure Z, the one-tenth-of-a-cent sales tax backed by Fresno County voters in 2004.

It's smart marketing, really. Drip irrigation, pruning, asphalt walkways and painting cages aren't really exciting, but prairie dogs, rattlesnakes, trained exotic birds and sting rays — wow!

▶ Tell us what you think. Comment on this editorial by going to http://www.fresnobee.com/opinion, then click on the editorial.

If you go

Admission to "Stingray Bay: A Touching Experience" is $1 with regular zoo admission. Fresno Chaffee Zoo members and children under 2 years old are free. The sting rays can be fed for an additional $1. Zoo membership is $50 per year.

YOUR VIEWS

MEET OUR LETTER WRITERS

Tom Moradian

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA/THE FRESNO BEE

Age: 63

Occupation: Teacher, retired from Sanger High School; now adjunct English teacher at Reedley College; nonfiction writer.

Hobbies: Gardening, reading, family fun, writing letters to The Bee.

Bee reader since: 1960.

How many letters: 54 since 1997.

Favorite topics: Our connections with nature; the folly of war; the need to rethink and re-evaluate our views on a variety of subjects.

Why do you write? It's my duty as a citizen to be informed and articulate, and to question authority.

Excerpt from recent letter: "To the question 'What went wrong?' in the lives of Robert Quiroz, 21, and his young family [story March 18], an answer may be too much too soon. Teenage romance, early marriage, military service in the Middle East, one child, another soon after, the mother's death at 20, the infant's broken arm followed by his death, a murder charge against the young father. This is the life of a man-child bringing children into the world. We all will pay to help raise the remaining child, and perhaps to imprison her father. He very likely is a fine person who simply did not understand the consequences of acting like a man."

Reaction to letters: Positive, encouraging. I'd like some sharp disagreement.

Topic that doesn't get enough attention: Population growth in the Valley, our nation's most prosperous agricultural area.

Education: Bachelor's degree, philosophy, English; master's degree in English from California State University, Fresno.

Family: Wife, Margie; daughters Rose, Anna and Eleanor; grandchildren Ruby, 1; Porter, 7; and Evelyn, 5.

Political philosophy: Power corrupts; adversity strengthens.

— Compiled by Pam Rowse

'A sad condition'

Debbie Young's bitter complaint about one stray cat and abandoned kittens [letter May 8] was in stark contrast to my daughter-in-law and grandson's response to a similar situation.

My daughter-in-law heard of a co-worker who abandoned four newborn kittens in an old car. The car was going to be sold and hauled off with the kittens inside. She was at work, but she phoned her son and told him the location of the car lot. He quickly went to rescue the kittens and stopped before taking them home for baby bottles and newborn kitten formula.

I was one of those called to help feed the babies. Soon one will come home with me.

It's a sad condition and a reflection of a person's values when they are unfeeling and hostile to animals. It makes a person wonder who else, other than cats, they are hostile toward.

Ms. Young asked, "Why do I have to do the job of Animal Control?" I'll answer that: It takes a village to take care of children, and sometimes it takes a village to take care of small creatures, too.

Georgie Dayton
Fresno

Keeping a promise

To save Camp El-O-Win is a commitment we made to girls in the Valley — a promise on which we will deliver! We believe in girls having opportunities to share experiences with peers, develop skills, accept leadership responsibilities, have experiences that build confidence and self-esteem and be part of a legacy of stewardship for the care of our fragile environment.

With personal knowledge of what a quality, safe camping experience does for a child, we move forward, seeking support from those who have known a child touched by the magic of camp. Girls deserve Camp El-O-Win.

In 2005 and 2006, the Friends of Camp El-O-Win not only raised the funds needed to run successful programs at camp and pay for all repairs and maintenance, we ran the programs and made the repairs. Committed? You bet!

To reach our goal, we shall leave no stone unturned, no partnership unexplored. We are grateful for the community's support. We appreciate Table Mountain's demonstrated belief in our campaign. Could you look a girl in the eye and tell her we could not save her camp? I don't plan to be put in that situation.

Jane Martin
President
Friends of Camp El-O-Win
Fresno

'Should be proud'

I was on a flight from Denver to Fresno on May 8. On the flight were the 17 Air National Guard members returning to Fresno from duty in the Middle East [story May 9].

What an outstanding group they were. It makes me proud that people like these are still serving our country. People of the San Joaquin Valley should be proud of them. This is what the country is all about. It is not about Michael Moore, Jane Fonda or Rosie O'Donnell and the likes of them.

Allan A. Knudson
Hanford

No natural history

Fresno, a town of nearly 500,000 people, does not have a museum of natural history, yet is trying to raise money for an aquarium. I find that hard to understand.

To understand the Valley and educate our young people, it would be nice to have a history of the animals and plants that have lived here, and are still living in some areas. Also, a history of the Indians who lived here.

I would much rather see that than an aquarium. I will go to the coast to view that sort of thing. We have a lot of museums here: Metropolitan, African-American, Arte Americas, Art Museum, Meux Home, Kearney Mansion, Armenian. The River Parkway offers river history.

A good place for a museum of natural history would be downtown. The Metropolitan, Arte Americas and African-American museums are already there. Anyone else out there think we should have one? I'd like to know the names and habits of some of the birds rather than the ocean fish.

Juliette Greer
Fresno

Speak up for safety

Obviously, I do not belong to the college-age generation, as I was totally amazed that none of the students reported to authorities that the college shooter near California State University, Fresno often showed he had a gun — a lethal weapon!

It also seems strange that the students who frequently saw it would brush it off as just an oddity of the person.

Perhaps this tragedy will encourage students to speak up in the future and get involved in doing the right thing.

Diane Therese
Fresno

Can't 'Buy American'

Hurrah for Edith Countryman for her letter May 11 on *not* buying more Hershey candy! Her dried fruit was processed in China. Well, I took my husband shopping for new jeans. Where do you think Lee jeans are made? The label reads, "Made in Costa Rica of U.S. Fabric." Should have checked the label first — but where would I have found jeans made in the United States?

I wrote a letter to Hershey telling them I had purchased my last peanut butter cup. The closing of American factories to move to another country is unfair to our workers. Where have all the manufacturing jobs gone?

During World War II there was a slogan: "Buy American." I would, but you can't find anything anymore. Maybe the politicians could come up with a new tax on "out-of-country-made products" and put it in an unemployment fund for our workers!

Alene Duncan
Fresno

'Pilot error'

If the young pilot, Ted G. Freitas (letter May 10) who had some trouble with the Fresno air traffic control likes the Internal Revenue Service, he is going to love the Federal Aviation Administration. If he lets them, they will kill him and label it "pilot error."

Sadly, there was a time, long gone, when you could take a problem to the FAA and they would help. Now, if you call to complain of poor handling, they will call your employer and try to have you fired. You will never be right and they will never be wrong.

You must, indeed, learn to use the system, but start with the assumption that they are your enemy. Fifty-two years and 17,000 hours in aviation is the background for this assertion.

Good luck, kid.

LaRoy H. (Mick) Mickelson
Fresno

'Uplifting' event

I don't know if I've ever been involved in an event as uplifting as the National Alliance on Mental Illness Walk. I participated in the NAMI walk May 12 at Woodward Park. It was amazing to see hundreds (thousands?) of people supporting those with a mental illness, to do so with such love and care, and without any stigma.

It was inspiring to see community leaders such as Henry Perea and Pat Hill there to support this event. Equally impressive were the family and friends who showed up to be a part of this event.

I hope some day our society could be this supportive of those with mental illnesses, and show the same level of compassion that is shown to those with cancer or AIDS.

Mary Steffora
Fresno

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TWO VIEWS:

Should the region come together to create a Metro Rural Loop through Fresno and Madera counties?

It's not too early to plan future for the next century

Imagination is a powerful word. It can be used to experience great extremes — from love and happiness to fear and chaos. The use of imagination allows the mind to preview experiences that might be.

So let's stop a minute and use our imagination to preview what our community will look like 100 years from now.

Recently in The Bee, the state Department of Finance reported that the Valley is outpacing the rest of California in population growth. At the same time, the city of Fresno recorded its highest growth rate since 1992.

AL SMITH

They are also telling us that within the next 100 years the Fresno-Madera area could have as many as 5 to 6 million residents. Imagine that — seven or eight times as many people living here than we have today.

I use to think that 100 years was a long time. Of course, that was before I hit that magic retirement age. As it relates to land use, 100 years goes by very quickly — like it's just around the corner.

Because of transportation requirements, this huge explosion of population will bring an increase of pollution to our air and massive gridlock that we have come to associate with a large number of automobiles, all vying for limited space on congested roadways.

Add to that urban sprawl — the destruction of precious farmland and natural resources and a continuation of concentrated poverty — and one can see that "Houston, we have a problem."

If we are going to have 5 to 6 million people traveling our roads and highways in the next 100 years, we better begin planning for it now. When you combine the challenge with the complexities of accomplishing things in government time, needless to say, "time is a-wastin'."

In spite of all of the competence of our recently constructed freeways, what we have today will not even be close to adequate for the growth that we can expect.

So we have a lot to consider as we imagine our community of tomorrow.

One method that has recently been offered for this transportation dilemma is a project called the Metro Rural Loop.

This "loop" would basically surround the central Fresno area with modern, clean highways that would create convenient access to most of the areas of population concentration — basically connecting 15-17 local cities that are in Fresno and Madera counties.

The Metro Rural Loop is not a unique concept. In many major metropolitan cities, experts have found it efficient to create what they call the "spoke and wheel" concept of moving people, along with goods and services, around large metropolitan areas. One only has to look to Atlanta, Los Angeles or Chicago to find successful examples of this idea.

Our spoke-and wheel would allow the for the expansion of Highways 99, 41, 180, and 168 and extending state Route 65 on the east side of the Valley and state Route 145 on the west.

In addition to automobiles, these corridors could include light rail, express lanes for vehicles and, where needed, routes that could be used for bus rapid transit. Bus rapid transit achieves most of the public transit benefits of light rail, but offers it at a lower cost and more flexibility, thus allowing it to be customized to a community's current needs and modified for the future.

Here is just one example of what the Metro Rural Loop would create:

Let's say that today we attempt to travel from downtown Reedley to downtown Clovis. According to MapQuest, we would drive more than 33 miles of surface streets and it would take a little under an hour.

Utilizing the spoke-and-wheel concept, that same drive would cut the travel time almost in half, producing fewer starts and stops, fewer miles driven, less pollution and, of course, less fuel expense.

This Reedley-to-Clovis example is just one of many examples the Metro Rural Loop concept would allow to make transportation more efficient.

The Metro Rural Loop is a comprehensive initiative that will need regional collaboration of local governments and private entities. Included must be the counties of Fresno and Madera, along with the 17 local cities.

If we digest all these numbers — 5 to 6 million people, 100 years and our current transportation corridors — we realize we had better begin addressing the problem now.

I "imagine" it's time to start.

▶ Al Smith is president and chief executive officer of the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce. He can be reached at alsmith@fresnochamber.com or at 495-4816.

Let's slam brakes on this whole idea of more sprawl

Fresno's air quality is designated a federal non-attainment zone.

The Metro Rural Loop poses a necessity to consider the project with caution. The plan is promoted with the use of trendy phraseology and contemporary key words of the urban-planning community. One has to be weary of the marketing package and approach this plan with apprehension that the project could simply be a disguise for a 500-square-mile land grab for the proliferation of tract-house building trends and an extended Los Angeles.

J.P. SWEENEY

The terminology used describes the plan as: "SMART high-intensity compact development of mixed use residential, commercial, industrial, public facility and open space land ... ." This can easily be interpreted to describe even smaller tract-house lot sizes for the purpose of increasing housing developer interest profitability and the propagation of strip centers, which is the current status-quo method of building. This method of urban growth has proven itself to be environmentally non-sustainable and consequently, is economically a destructive method of community growth.

The proposed Metro Rural Loop plan calls for connectivity through a transit-oriented corridor.

All of downtown Fresno was originally built as transit-oriented back in the 1800s. Fresno's growth during its most vibrant era of prosperity rivaled Los Angeles and San Francisco. Fresno was a very desirable place to live. It was easy to get anywhere in town and ideally located in the center of the state. It was in the middle of everything.

It is puzzling to stand back and look at what Fresno originally offered, what it had, what it has become and why. Fresno's initial 50-year boom was followed immediately by a devastating decline that included the removal of its transportation system.

The past 70 years have shown that the automobile is not a sustainable mode of transportation and that removing a transit system will destroy the overall community's productive output by eliminating the central commerce cluster.

In the December 2006 draft of Fresno's Downtown Transportation and Infrastructure Study the consultant said: "There is a direct correlation between the explosion of fringe-area development and the central area's growing problems. The statistics of overbuilding the suburbs and loss of markets in the central area and other parts of the city support it. Unless a clear edge is firmly established for what will constitute the extent of the city's geographic expansion over the next 20 years, and unless the city's adopted plans are followed with some measure of consistency, there appears to be little basis for actually re-establishing the economic vitality, strength and property functions of the central area."

In other words: Sprawl is killing downtown. Downtown's solution is to go back to the original design and reinstitute the mobility component — creating convenient access which is a vital component necessary for revitalization. Downtown Fresno was built as the commerce hub for the entire San Joaquin Valley, not just the metropolitan area. Downtown is not built to sustain automobile traffic and needs a well-developed transit system network to allow convenient travel without the use of automobiles.

The Metro Rural Loop will further kill downtown without first rebuilding downtown to make it the regional commerce hub. And there will be no revitalization without a convenient method of mobility.

Transit is recession-proof. Higher gas prices bring a desire for alternative methods of transportation and increased need for an efficient transit system.

The Metro Rural Loop calls for a transit-oriented corridor. As the general rule; a transit-oriented development is a high-density, mixed-use real estate development that requires transit as its primary source of mobility. These developments are within a five-minute walk, within a quarter mile of a transit station and are generally incorporated into the development of a transit station.

To create a transit-oriented corridor is to develop a series of stations (ideally a half-mile apart) that are connected through a central transit system. The 1- to 1½-mile swath on either side of a transit line would be over-building in relation to the developments.

As the Metro Rural Loop states: "These wide, interconnected corridors and loops will provide the opportunity for rail, light rail, busways, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, auto and truck traffic to serve and be supported by SMART high-intensity compact development of mixed-use residential, commercial, industrial, public facility and open space land uses aligned and contained to a depth of 1 to 1½ miles along either side of the newly developing portions of these primary regional metropolitan arteries."

Careful planning has to be adhered to when considering what the future holds. To build a regional plan for the future, such a plan has to include the future source of mobility. Mobility is the base of urban growth. The automobile is not environmentally sustainable; it is unlikely that the current automobile can survive its transportation dominance another 50 years in light of advanced transit-system technology development. Adding to the decline of the automobile is the reduction of oil supply and the rise of oil-production costs. In developing a regional urban plan, it is important to consider the advances of new transportation alternatives.

A simple Metro Rural Loop road with its spoke section road connectivity and the current call for its three-mile-wide swath, without considering alternative methods of environmentally sustainable transportation, is nothing more than a pattern of status-quo growth. Transportation is the essential base element to effect air quality and regional economic health.

The future is exceedingly important, but the lead agency that is promoting this plan is the planning department of the city of Fresno. There are immediate issues within the city's sphere of influence; and even issues within its own jurisdiction that would lead one to ask the question as to why the 500 square miles of development for Metro Rural Loop is deemed as a city of Fresno priority.

Here's a thought: Help to develop a privatized alternative transit system for today.

▶ J.P. Sweeney is chief executive officer of Central Transit and Development Corp. He can be reached at jpatrick@centraltransit.com or www.centraltransit.com.

Transporation corridor must give ag breathing room

The Metro Rural Loop proposal is far-sighted and well-intentioned. The idea is to prevent urban sprawl from overrunning the entire region by attracting future growth to existing cities and towns and to new transportation corridors that link them.

EDWARD THOMPSON JR.

Its originators say it could save 700 square miles of farmland in the next century. It would also, they say, alleviate traffic congestion, improve air quality and create economic opportunity for local communities throughout Fresno and Madera counties. Sounds like everyone wins.

I certainly hope so. But unless this new framework for development is properly designed and accompanied by effective growth management policies, it could become just another beltway of the kind that has spawned urban sprawl around nearly every sizable American city. And agriculture — the economic mainstay of the region — would be only one of the losers.

To determine if and how the loop should go forward, there are some critical agricultural issues it should address:

■ **Will the loop direct growth away from the most productive farmland in the region?**

Many of the cities that the loop would connect are in the midst of the best farmland in the region, the land with the most fertile soils and the cheapest, most reliable water supplies. Will the alignment and configuration of the new transportation corridors and, indeed, the kind of transportation envisioned — highway, light rail, something brand new? — steer clear of the best farmland?

■ **Will the loop help the cities grow in a compact, efficient manner to minimize the conversion of farmland?**

With or without the loop, if the urban areas of Fresno and Madera counties continue to grow at the current rate, consuming an acre of farmland for every nine people, they will lose another 270,000 acres (420 square miles) of mostly agricultural land by 2050. Will the loop provide new transportation options that free people from driving everywhere, reduce the need for streets and parking lots, enabling land to be saved while generating the same amount of economic opportunity?

■ **Will the loop leave enough room between cities and corridors to be economically farmed?**

Agriculture needs elbow room to operate. If too many neighbors live close to farms, it leads to physical and legal conflicts that inevitably increase the risk and cost of farming. The loop plan contemplates a wheel-and-spoke system of urban corridors with pie-shaped wedges of open land in between. Will the open areas be large enough to allow farming to continue without undue interference or cost?

■ **What will prevent development from taking place outside cities, towns and the new transportation corridors?**

If the loop is to succeed as a magnet for growth that would otherwise spread all over the land, some way must be devised to contain new development within cities, towns and the new transportation corridors. General plans, zoning and annexation policies are all designed to do this.

But too often they are changed or compromised at the whim of developers or individual landowners seeking to cash in on a windfall. And thus far, they have not prevented the spread of rural "ranchette" development that now comprises 26% of the developed area of Fresno County and 52% in Madera. Can a new generation of growth management policies be devised and implemented to work with the loop to produce the win-win outcome we all want?

Nearly a decade ago, American Farmland Trust teamed with the Fresno County Farm Bureau, Fresno Business Council, Fresno Chamber of Commerce and the Building Industry Association of the San Joaquin Valley to produce "A Landscape of Choice," which outlined strategies for improving community growth in the region.

It called for all of the things now known as "smart growth," including using transportation options to build more tightly knit communities and saving farmland to sustain agriculture.

Today, that consensus document is still a useful guide, not only for planning a possible Metro Rural Loop, but also for other important planning ventures in the region, such as Fresno County's agricultural buffers task force and the model farmland protection program it is just beginning to design.

▶ Edward Thompson Jr. is California state director for American Farmland Trust, a national conservation organization working to protect the best farmland and environmental quality. For more information, visit www.farmland.org/california.