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To: San Joaquin Valley Regional Transportation Planning Agencies Policy Council

From: Jen Covino, President
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Subject: 2024 Valley Voice Meetings Summary

The San Joaquin Valley Regional Transportation Planning Agencies Policy Council traveled to Washington, D.C. for meetings on September 10-11, 2024 to advocate for regional projects and policy priorities related to transportation and infrastructure, particularly projects involving highways, transit, rail, goods movement, and emissions reductions strategies to improve air quality. Local officials met with Members of Congress and Administration officials from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and the White House.

Projects reviewed with federal officials included the following: the SR 58/SR 99 National Freight Network Interchange to Protect Local Neighborhoods project; the South Fresno State Route 99 Corridor Project; Madera 41 South Expressway Project; the Tulare SR 99 Corridor and Paige Avenue Multimodal Interchange Improvements Project; future SR 99 Investments in Merced County; the Zero-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure project, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project, Agriculture Burning and Equipment projects sponsored by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (SJV APCD); the Grangeville Boulevard Grade Separation project sponsored by the City of Hanford; the Stockton Diamond Grade Separation Project, Ceres to Turlock Double-Tracking Project, Madera High-Speed Rail Station, Valley Rail North-Sacramento Extension project, and The Rail Academy of Central California (TRACC) projects sponsored by the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRRC).

The group shared concerns regarding maintaining funding for critical programs authorized by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) during the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget and appropriations process; maintaining funding for local projects sponsored by the delegation as Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) and Community Project Funding (CPF) requests; establishing new or additional sources of federal funding to better support farm-to-market routes in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill or the surface transportation bill, including support for legislation introduced by Congressman David Valadao; addressing the long-term solvency of the



Highway Trust Fund (HTF) with considerations for the adverse impacts of potential revenue solutions on rural communities; prioritizing federal funding through programs intended to maintain a state of good repair and programs that provide direct support to regional and local governments.

Please see an overview of important takeaways and next steps discussed in each meeting below.

Tuesday

September 10, 2024

The White House

Office of Intergovernmental Affairs

Stephanie Sykes, Special Assistant to the President

Rick Hart, Advisor

Infrastructure Implementation Team

Minelly De Coe, Special Assistant to the President for Infrastructure Implementation

John Lucey, Senior Advisor

Amar Bhardwaj, Policy Advisor

The Policy Council kicked off the Valley Voice 2024 trip by meeting with officials from the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and the Infrastructure Implementation Team. The group was joined by Advisor Rick Hart from the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs as well as Special Assistant to the President for Infrastructure Implementation Minelly De Coe, Senior Advisor John Lucey, and Policy Advisor Amar Bhardwaj from the Infrastructure Implementation Team. Special Assistant to the President Stephanie Sykes sat in on part of the discussion.

In a discussion on highway projects, the White House prompted questions about pending grant applications and assured the Council that they will keep an eye out for any incoming applications. Taking note of limitations in the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) program expressed by the group, Senior Advisor John Lucey assured the group that this funding cycle was highly competitive and there would be future opportunities to apply for other federal funds in support of the regional initiatives included in that grant application. He noted that awards for competitive grant programs authorized by the *Inflation Reduction Act* (P.L. 117-169) will be released mid-October this year, while stressing that tax credits should be around for 10 years (barring any reforms pursued by Congress in the 119th Session next year).

In the discussion on the importance of farm-to-market routes in the 2024 Farm Bill, Advisor Rick Hart offered to connect Supervisor Doug Verboon with the White House Office of Agricultural Affairs and Commodity Policy to better understand the vision for the reauthorization. At the end of the



meeting, Special Assistant Minelly De Coo asked the Council to keep their team apprised on any projects with transformative impacts for the Administration to highlight over the months ahead.

Congressman Jim Costa

The group headed to the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center for a meeting with Congressman Jim Costa, where he began the conversation by praising the Policy Council's team for efficient communications with his Congressional offices and staff. The group discussed the following highway, air quality, and rail projects: the South Fresno State Route 99 Corridor Project, Zero-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure projects, San Joaquin Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project; Agriculture Burning and Equipment project, and the BNSF Second Main Track project. The Congressman confirmed that his district office has provided a letter of support for the Fresno Council of Governments' (Fresno COG) \$25 million grant application submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) under the Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA) Grant Program seeking assistance for the South Fresno State Route 99 Corridor Project.

On air quality, the Congressman asked to follow up with the group on their projects and priorities. He also suggested that there may be a need for him to meet with EPA Administrator Michael Regan on funding priorities for the Valley.

The discussion then shifted to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget and appropriations process and the Farm Bill. The Congressman encouraged the delegation to continue to express support for Congressman David Valadao's *Farm to Market Road Improvement Act*. He then warned the group on the possibility of a government shutdown if lawmakers fail to pass a Continuing Resolution (CR) before funding expires at the end of September. He noted that, as a member of the House Appropriations Committee and Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development, and Related Agencies, Congressman Valadao would have good insights on the status of those negotiations. The Congressman also warned of upcoming claw backs or reductions for transportation funding that could be triggered by the top-level spending caps established by the *Fiscal Responsibility Act* (P.L. 118-5).

Wednesday

September 11, 2024

Office of Congressman David Valadao

Parker Edwards, Legislative Assistant

The Policy Council met with Congressman David Valadao's Legislative Assistant Parker Edwards, who began the meeting with a general congratulations to the Central Valley's progress to date on its infrastructure investments and air quality improvements. Supervisor Doug Verboon then discussed



several projects of significance located in the 22nd Congressional District, including the SR 58/SR 99 National Freight Network Interchange to Protect Local Neighborhoods project, Tulare SR 99 Corridor and Paige Avenue Multimodal Interchange Improvements Project, Zero-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure project, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, and Grangeville Boulevard Grade Separation project.

The conversation then segued into the legislative strategy for the Congressman's *Farm to Market Road Improvement Act*. Congressman Valadao recently introduced the bipartisan measure in collaboration with Congresswoman Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick (FL-D). Parker shared that they are currently looking into getting the Senate to introduce a companion bill in the chamber, and he intends to meet with the House Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee to discuss the bill soon. On the inequities of transportation funding for the Central Valley in the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, Parker noted that the Congressman is interested in trying to provide a set aside or prioritization for farm-to-market routes in counties that produce the most agricultural product.

According to the bill summary, the Farm to Market Road Improvement Act: *creates a 10 percent set aside in the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program for farm to market roads; defines farm to market roads as roads within a county that has an annual gross agriculture production value of at least \$1 billion and agriculture production of at least \$500,000 per square mile; and requires the U.S. Department of Transportation and U.S. Department of Agriculture to create, and annually update, a list of covered counties.* It is referred to as H.R.9531 with the purpose "To make projects in certain counties eligible for funding under the rural surface transportation grant program, and for other purposes."

The Council then informed Parker that Senator Laphonza Butler expressed interest in supporting Congressman Valadao's efforts to address the transportation funding inequities in California in discussion with a small group of delegates earlier that day. The Council asked other members of the Congressional delegation to consider signing on as co-sponsors of the legislation and the Offices of Senator Alex Padilla and Senator Butler to consider having their bosses introduce a companion measure in the Senate. To date, Congressman Jim Costa, Congressman Vince Fong, and Congressman John Duarte have all signed on as co-sponsors of the measure. We will continue coordinating on next steps for legislative advocacy.

Congressman Josh Harder

Kara Verma, Senior Legislative Aide

The group met with Congressman Josh Harder, and the Policy Council discussed various regional and local projects in District 9, including the Zero-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure projects, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, Stockton Diamond Grade Separation, the Valley Rail



North – Sacramento Extension project, the BNSF Second Main Track project, and The Rail Academy of Central California (TRACC) project. The Congressman highlighted efforts he has made to help improve air quality in the Central Valley, notably by securing 20 new electric vehicle (EV) buses for the Stockton Unified School District as well as a new boat for the Port of Stockton, which has achieved a 99 percent decrease in emissions. As the meeting concluded, the Congressman addressed the importance of resources from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for the community. The Congressman shared that he would like to be supportive of the Stockton Diamond Grade Separation Project.

Office of Senator Laphonza Butler

Maria Martirosyan, Policy Advisor

Alex Baldonado, Legislative Aide

The group met with Senator Laphonza Butler's Policy Advisor Maria Martirosyan and Legislative Aid Alex Baldonado. On the topic of agriculture and transportation, the Policy Council communicated their recent conversation with Congressman David Valadao's office regarding the *Farm to Market Road Improvement Act*. They explained that this initiative would prioritize grant applications for agriculture hubs such as the Central Valley. The Chairman also shared with the Senator's team that the Senator seemed interested in Congressman Valadao's efforts during their conversation at the weekly photo-opportunity. Both Maria and Alex mentioned that their time in the Senator's office was coming to a close, but they would communicate this plan with the rest of the staff, including Senator Alex Padilla's office. They then shared that due to the Senator's upcoming departure, the Senator would not be keen on introducing a companion bill, but they would be happy to co-sponsor a bill if it was offered by Senator Padilla. Maria encouraged the Council to reach out for any pending letters of support and noted that senior staff and sometimes the Senator herself will check in on applications to ensure progress continues.

U.S. Department of Transportation

Office of the Secretary Office of Government Affairs

Evan Wessel, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs

Sabrina McNeal, Government Affairs Specialist

Toiyriah Turner, Administrative Officer

Federal Transit Administration

Heather Haney, Community Planner

Federal Railroad Administration

Cory Gattie, Government Affairs Specialist



The full delegation traveled to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) for a meeting led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Intergovernmental Affairs Evan Wessel and Government Affairs Specialist Sabrina McNeal featuring other various officials representing the Office of the Secretary, Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

The meeting began with a discussion on the Stockton Grade Separation Project, in which the Policy Council expressed their disappointment with project selections for rail grants as they have applied multiple times and have not received funding from DOT. Sabrina added that the application process is competitive and asked if FRA teams have been on site to evaluate the project. The Council mentioned that FRA had visited and noted that there are ongoing studies for the site and there is wide support for the project. Sabrina indicated that she will touch base with FRA on the project. We have followed up with Sabrina responding to inquiries from her colleagues at FRA in hopes of facilitating a site visit.

After the group provided an overview of all their transportation projects, Sabrina suggested the following funding streams for their projects: Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) program, loans through the Build America Bureau, and Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) Grant program. The PROTECT Grant Program would be particularly well suited for local projects involving evacuation routes. DOT officials shared that Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) will be released this fall for the PROTECT Grant program, Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program, and the RAISE Grant Program. The Department will soon announce awards made through the pending round of the National Infrastructure Project Assistance program (MEGA Program) and the Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA) Grant Program.

They flagged the Department recently launched the Reconnecting Communities Institute (RCI) to help grant writers improve their applications, if that is of interest to the Council. Lastly, DOT asked the Council to share the value of projects funded by the *Bipartisan Infrastructure Law* (P.L. 117-58) with members of the California Congressional delegation to secure more funding in the future.

Congressman Vince Fong

Representatives of the Valley Voice delegation headed back to the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) to meet with Congressman Vince Fong for the first time in Washington, DC in his new role. The Council addressed projects specific to the 20th Congressional District, including the Zero-Emission Vehicle Infrastructure projects, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, Grangeville Boulevard Grade Separation project, and BNSF Second Main Track project. When briefed about Congressman Valadao's *Farm to Market Road Improvement Act*, he expressed interest and support



for the measure. However, he noted that the chamber's bandwidth to consider legislation will be limited ahead of the elections due to the chamber's focus on passing a stopgap to avoid a government shutdown.

Congressman John Duarte

Kyle Lombardi, Chief of Staff

The Policy Council sat down with Congressman John Duarte, who began the conversation on the impacts of high-speed rail and indicated that he is sympathetic to rail projects in moving freight and goods movement. Although the Congressman addressed flaws in the government's funding process, he stated that he is proud to support and participate in the Community Project Funding (CPF) process. This year, he carried a number of CPF requests on behalf of Policy Council member agencies.

The Council introduced project specific requests that were specific to the Congressman's District, including the SR 58/SR 99 National Freight Network Interchange to Protect Local Neighborhoods project, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, Ceres to Turlock Double Tracking Project, Madera High-Speed Rail Station Project, and BNSF Second Main Track project.

The Congressman expressed his desire to roll back on requirements and restrictions from the *Bipartisan Infrastructure Law* (P.L. 117-58) to save money and make programs more efficient, including by removing Build America, Buy America, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and Carbon Neutral requirements burdening local governments.

On the topic of efficient spending, the Congressman asked for support for a bill that would extend the South Fulson Canal to the Delta and his plan to work with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to improve water infrastructure west of the Valley. He estimated that the project would grow production from 7,000 to 20,000-acre feet per year, while saving \$5 to \$10 billion in comparison to the alternative Delta Tunnel methods. His Chief of Staff Kyle Lombardi indicated he would share maps of the project with the Policy Council. The Council also suggested scheduling a meeting with the Congressman's office and the San Joaquin Valley Regional Transportation Planning Agencies Water Council to discuss the project in depth.

Office of Congressman Jay Obernolte

Will Burns, Legislative Assistant

The Policy Council briefly met with Congressman Jay Obernolte's Legislative Assistant Will Burns, who oversees transportation policy. The Council discussed individual projects in California's 23rd



Congressional District pertaining to rail and air quality, including the San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, and BNSF Second Main Track project. Kern COG Executive Director Ahron Hakemi provided an update on the S58/Edwards AFB North Gate Intersection Improvement Project and expressed gratitude for the Congressman's ongoing support of that project. Will asked that the Policy Council keep the member's office informed once grant applications are submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) or other federal agencies.

Congressman Tom McClintock

The Policy Council met with Congressman Tom McClintock. The Congressman opened the meeting by expressing opposition to utilizing federal funding for transit and passenger or high-speed rail projects at the expense of highway infrastructure. Members of the Policy Council discussed projects in the Congressman's Congressional District, including the Madera 41 South Expressway Project, San Joaquin Valley Locomotive Emissions Reduction Project, Heavy-Duty Vehicle Replacement project, Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, and Ceres to Turlock Double-Tracking Project. Although the Congressman disagrees with the way grants are funded by the Executive Branch, he indicated that he would provide a letter of support for the Madera 41 South Expressway Project since he wants his constituents to see a return on their investment of federal tax dollars. He asked to be kept informed on all projects and pending federal grant applications. During the discussion on the air quality Agricultural Burning and Equipment project, the Congressman expressed concern over burdensome requirements and new costs for farmers.

Senator Alex Padilla

Angela Ebner, Policy Advisor

Jacob Huls, Policy Advisor

The Council concluded the final day of meetings with a discussion with Senator Alex Padilla and his team. Supervisor Vernoon began the discussion with an overview of the necessary rail projects that would aid the Central Valley, especially for farmers. Policy Advisors Angela Ebner and Jacob Huls inquired on whether these projects align with CalTrans, to which the Council confirmed they do. Senator Padilla was able to briefly join the meeting during the discussion on air quality policies and projects aimed at reducing congestion. The Senator asked for a prioritized list of projects, ranked from most environmentally beneficial per capita or county to least. Regarding Congressman David Valadao's *Farm to Market Road Improvement Act*, the Senator's staff was interested in learning more about the funding opportunities this legislation would provide. Angela noted that Senator Padilla is a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and would be interested in introducing a potential companion bill. We will follow up with their staff.