



Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) Site Visit Summary Report

Researchers: Brian Dabson & Katharine Ferguson

Visit Dates: September 2-6, 2019

Interviewees:

Julie Alvis, Deputy Executive Officer, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, Auburn CA,
(formerly Deputy Assistant Secretary, California Natural Resources Agency) (by phone)

James Corless, Executive Director, SACOG, Sacramento CA

Ken Hiatt, Assistant City Manager for Community & Economic Development, City of Woodland CA

Glenda Humiston, Vice President, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of California,
Oakland CA (by phone)

Josh Huntsinger, Agricultural Commissioner, Placer County, Auburn CA

Trish Kelly, Managing Director, Valley Vision, Sacramento CA

Mary Kimball, Executive Director, Center for Land-Based Learning, Winters CA

Kacey Lizon, Deputy Executive Director, SACOG, Sacramento CA

Craig McNamara, Walnut Farm Owner, Winters CA

David Shabazian, RUCS Program Manager, SACOG, Sacramento CA

Chris Turkovic, Turkovic Family Wines, Winters CA

SACOG Board Members (Lunch Meeting):

- Lucas Frerichs, Council Member, City of Davis, SACOG Board Vice Chair; Jill Gayaldo, Council Member, Rocklin City Council; Robert Jankovitz, Council Member, Isleton City Council; Mike Kozlowski, Council Member, Folsom City Council; Mike Leahy, Supervisor, Yuba County; Pierre Neu, Council Member, City of Winters; Susan Peters, Supervisor, Sacramento County; Ricky Samayoa, Mayor, Marysville; David Sander, Vice Mayor, Rancho Cordova City Council, SACOG Board Chair; Don Saylor, Supervisor, Yolo County; Tom Stallard, Council Member, Woodland City Council; Aleksandar Tica, Council Member, Live Oak; Rick West, Mayor, Wheatland.

Background

- The Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS) is a program of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments. It is both a strategy for looking at the region's growth and sustainability objectives from a rural perspective, and a suite of data and analytical tools for "proactive rural planning" that allows for forecasting and preparing possible future scenarios. RUCS, created in 2007, was recognized as a Top 25 Program for Innovations in American Government in 2015 by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and received an Innovations Award in 2011 from the National Association of Development Organizations.
- Accordingly, RUCS has attracted much attention from across the country, but because of its dual nature as a strategy and data tool, its replication elsewhere has been elusive. It was selected for a site visit to better understand what RUCS is, how it functions as a rural-urban connector, and the extent to which it is a product specific to the California policy environment.



Organization

- Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) was authorized through a Joint Powers Agreement in 1980 (later revised 2003) by six counties (El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yuba, and Yolo) and 22 cities. Its role is to act as a forum for discussion and study of area-wide issues and concerns, notably transportation, water quality, air quality, land use, housing, and employment. SACOG facilitates policies and action recommendations, and independently reviews projects receiving federal and state funding.
- It is governed by a 32-member board of directors (one of whom is ex-officio from Caltrans) which is responsible to the membership of constituent local governments. SACOG has a staff of 55, including the Executive Director. Its annual budget is approximately \$25 million.
- SACOG has several Federally and state defined responsibilities including:
 - Regional Transportation Agency for four counties (Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba) designated by the Secretary of the California Business, Transportation & Housing Agency
 - Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Sacramento, Yuba City, and Davis Urbanized Areas designated by the Governor and the U.S. Department of Transportation.
 - Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Sacramento Metropolitan Planning Area designated by the Secretary of the California Business, Transportation & Housing Agency.
 - Designated Airport Land Use Commission for Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba Counties.
 - Metropolitan Planning Organization for the federally designated ozone non-attainment area in Sacramento, Yolo, El Dorado, and Placer County and the Sutter Buttes.
- However, SACOG is not the designated Economic Development District (for U.S. Economic Development Administration purposes). El Dorado and Placer Counties are part of the Sierra Economic Development Corporation, Yuba and Sutter Counties form the Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation, and Yolo County has its own economic development district.

Context

- The complex legislative and policy landscape in California is a crucial part of the story of SACOG and RUCS. Here are some of the highlights:
 - **Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962** mandated the formation of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) nationwide in regions with populations greater than 50,000. These were charged with ensuring that transportation expenditures were based on continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning processes that involved local communities and the state. MPOs are designated by agreement between the state's governor and local governments representing 75 percent or more of the region's population. The Federal law allows MPO boards to adopt, with state approval, their own bylaws governing membership, voting rights, decision-making procedures, and advisory committees. Single city or county governments can host MPOs, or they can be housed in councils of government. There are over 400 MPOs across the United States. SACOG was formed in 1965.
 - **Mulford-Carrell Air Resources Act of 1967** created the **California Air Resources Board**, which was charged with developing a unified, statewide approach to addressing air pollution. It should be noted that there was, and still is, a statewide network of Air Pollution Control and Air Quality Management Districts (AQMD), which are not contiguous with the Councils of Government – there are five AQMDs within the SACOG region.
 - 1980s and 1990s saw rapid population growth in California; air quality, regional economic health, overcrowded schools, affordable housing, loss of agricultural land, and water shortages emerged as important issues. A growing interest in focused regional planning around environment and land use, coincided with the emerging national smart growth and sustainable development movement. Some states passed regional growth management legislation



- (Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon, and Florida) which provided California with some models to emulate. California's COGs/MPOs expanded their role as transportation agencies to address air quality, environment, affordable housing, and land use.
- In the 2000s, four metropolitan regions, San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, San Diego, and Los Angeles, launched visioning processes to develop regional land use growth scenarios and smart growth principles. These led to the state, in 2005, creating CALDOT's **California Regional Blueprint Planning Program** (Blueprint Program) to assist COGs/MPOs in conducting regional planning efforts that would result in consensus by regional leaders, local governments, and stakeholders on a Blueprint for a 20-year planning horizon through 2025.
 - **Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84)** authorized \$5.4 billion in general obligation bonds to fund a variety of projects as highlighted in the title. One of its provisions, "Sustainable Communities and Climate Change Reduction" made \$90 million available for incentives to encourage the development of regional and local land use plans designed to "promote water conservation, reduce automobile use and fuel consumption, encourage greater infill and compact development, protect natural resources and agricultural lands, and revitalize urban and community centers."
 - **California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (AB 32)** required the state to reduce its greenhouse gas from all sources to 1990 levels by 2020. It gave responsibility to the California Air Resources Board to monitor and reduce emissions that cause climate change.
 - **SB 732 of 2008** created the **Strategic Growth Council**, a cabinet-level committee tasked with coordinating the activities of state agencies with respect to improving air and water quality, protecting natural resource and agriculture lands, increasing the availability of affordable housing, improving infrastructure systems, and promoting public health. One of its roles is to assist state and local entities in the planning of sustainable communities and meeting AB 32 goals and distributing funds for planning under Proposition 84.
 - **Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375)** sought to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles. California Air Resources Board was required to set regional emissions targets and each MPO (including SACOG) was tasked with developing a Sustainable Communities Strategy, integrating transportation, land use, and housing policies to plan the achievement of the emissions target for its region.
 - The **Sacramento Region Blueprint**, approved by its Board of Directors in 2004, sought to "integrate land use and transportation planning to curb sprawl, cut down on vehicle emissions and congestion in order to improve the quality of life for residents of the region." As such it represented the regional interpretation of the state legislative framework. However, it was apparent that most of the attention was focused on the urban areas representing just 15 percent of the total land area, with rural lands largely undifferentiated and whose contribution to the region was not adequately understood or valued. In response in 2008, SACOG "shifted the paradigm to more explicitly include rural areas" by launching the Rural-Urban Connections Strategy project.
 - The **Rural-Urban Connections Strategy** was (and is) both an outreach strategy to farmers, producers, and communities, and an analytical platform for a broad array of data on the rural economy and environment. More detailed information will be provided later.
 - The **Regional Prosperity Strategy** is a collaboration between the SACOG, the Greater Sacramento Economic Council, the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, and Valley Vision. It was established in 2018 to take a fresh look at the regional economy in the light of significant and disruptive trends from globalization, technological change, and demographic shifts. The Brookings Institution was commissioned to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the Sacramento's regional economic position based on benchmarking assessments of 15 peer regions across the



country. One of the conclusions of Brooking's report, *Charting a Course to Sacramento Region's Future Economic Prosperity*, was that the region's primary competitive advantage is the food and agriculture sector and its intersection with science and technology. This served to underscore the prescience of SACOG's 'paradigm shift' mentioned above.

- SACOG's draft **Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (MTP/SCS)** to be adopted in 2020 is a 20-year regional transportation and land use strategy seeks to advance a range of goals, including economic opportunity, transportation options, affordable housing, air quality, open space and natural resources preservation, and greenhouse gas emissions. The strategy makes explicit reference to the value of investing in rural economies and smaller towns and connecting the natural resource economy to its urban markets.

Collaboration

- SACOG is a typical example of collaboration between six counties and 22 cities, brought together to tackle regional challenges. The staff provides high level expertise in transportation, planning, demographics, and data analysis to support the member governments. In addition, SACOG works with different combinations of counties and cities as part of its federally- or state-mandated transportation, land use, and air quality responsibilities.
- SACOG has a long-standing relationship with Valley Vision on outreach and visioning processes in the region. Valley Vision is a 25-year nonprofit that was created as a response to the closing of 21 military bases with a loss of 82,000 military and civilian personnel in the Sacramento area. It was tasked to be a neutral body to help organize community responses, and over the years has become a trusted partner providing research, community engagement and implementation support on a range of triple-bottom line efforts to public agencies and civic intermediaries. Valley Vision partnered with SACOG on the outreach to farmers, producers, and communities for the establishment of RUCS, and more recently with the formation of the Partnership for Prosperity.
- The importance of Valley Vision cannot be understated; as state leadership has changed and political administrations have come and gone, Valley Vision appears to have remained a constant, maintaining relationships and a consistent direction. A civic-sector intermediary able to morph itself into an entity that complements its partners and stepping in to fill gaps where needed (e.g. running civic engagement processes for an organization without that capacity or writing a project proposal for a Food Hub). Some might call Valley Vision a Rural/Regional Development Hub.

Rural-Urban Relationships

- The Sacramento region promotes itself as America's Farm-to-Fork Capital. 2013 saw the first Farm-to-Fork Festival, a celebration of the region's food and agriculture and a way of introducing people to the chefs, farmers, ranchers, vintners, and brewers who bring food and drinks to their table every day. This is now an annual two-week food, drink, and music event at the end of September bringing 100,000 visitors from across the country.
- According to some, RUCS is now part of an ecosystem of organizations that in various ways reinforce the importance of agriculture to the regional economy. These include Sacramento Food Policy Council, the Chamber's Food & Agriculture Committee, University of California-Davis, Center for Land-Based Learning, Farmer Veteran Coalition, and many others.
- The contribution of RUCS was described in many ways by interviewees, the common feature being that it was instrumental in making visible a rural-urban relationship that had been hidden in plain sight. The following are representative:
 - RUCS is an effective communications tool, allowing visual presentation of the role of farmland and its relationship with urban development. It enabled previously undifferentiated



undeveloped lands around urban centers to be seen in their full complexity and contributed to major shifts in state policy towards farmland.

- RUCS is a bridge to link rural and urban, and to uplift agriculture as being vitally important to the region and to a better understanding for urban residents about where food comes from.
- RUCS enabled SACOG to elevate the conversation about transportation in the region beyond commuting to consider how best to move agricultural products more efficiently through the region.
- RUCS is the basis of a model for rural economic development in the 21st century, focusing on natural assets, tourism, and working landscapes, the benefits of which are rarely appropriately monetized. Development pressures often reduce economic arguments to short-term assessments of property taxes and highest and best use of land calculations; as a result, a range of other important metrics are not considered such as jobs, air pollution, and long-term financial return.
- RUCS reinforces the fact that agriculture is a primary economic driver for the regional economy, whose long-term future is dependent upon the careful management of land, water and ecosystem services, and upon wise infrastructure investments, all of which require productive rural-urban relationships.
- RUCS provided a route to collective action through visits to Washington DC and farm and business tours. Transportation was shown to be critical for getting goods to market and in turn vital to rural regeneration. It took five years for the business community to see the value of agriculture to the economy.
- RUCS provides an array of analytical tools, including GIS, production data, scenarios for gauging the effects of changes in crop choices, market conditions, policies, water availability, and urban development. Much of this has been sourced from and validated by growers and processors in the region, and thus helps to build trust that the interests of rural areas are not being ignored.
- Unlike the original Sacramento Region Blueprint 15 years ago, the latest SACOG documents make specific reference to the importance of rural economies and smaller towns to the region. For example, in the draft Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy for 2020-2040, makes the following arguments for rural-urban interdependence:
 - The rural land base is vital to the region's agricultural economy, health, and quality of life. The land supports not only agriculture but also provides water supply and flood protection, recreation and tourism, habitat conservation, and provides aggregate and timber for development.
 - The fruit and vegetable industry contributes \$1.2 billion to the regional economy, with most agricultural jobs in processing, manufacturing, and distribution located in cities and urban areas. There is considerable potential for growth in value-added processing.
 - The plan will support the rural economy by strategically investing in transportation infrastructure to serve the farm-to-market activity of the natural resource economy.

Equity

- The Sacramento region is a rapidly growing and increasingly demographically diverse area. About 45 percent of the population comprise people of color and they are disproportionately represented in households that do not earn enough to cover their basic household expenses for housing, transportation, and childcare. Almost half of black families and over 40 percent of Hispanic families meet this definition. It is expected that by 2040, people of color will comprise over half of the region's population.
- As part of its preparatory work for the Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (MTP/SCS), SACOG is required under Federal and state law to carry out an



Environmental Justice analysis. This is to determine if the plan has any disproportionate negative impacts on low-income people and/or people of color living in the region and if the plan has disparate impacts specifically based on race, color, or national origin. SACOG takes a three-pronged approach to this task, through public meetings and online surveys, data analyses, and the production of fact sheets providing demographic data for each county and city to help local organizations engage with the issues. SACOG convenes an Equity Working Group to oversee this process and assess the Regional Economic Prosperity Strategy. The group's work is supported by a grant from the California Endowment and state funds.

- For many of the interviewees, the focus was on geographical equity, specifically ensuring that the needs of the rural areas of the region were properly addressed, and credited RUCS as being an important voice.

Commentary

- The unique policy environment in California has led to sustained state intervention and an acceptance of planning and coordination that is rare in other parts of the country. This can be illustrated by:
 - Strong legislative actions over the past 50 years to tackle pressing issues such as air quality, the consequences of rapid urban growth, water quality and supply, and more recently sustainable communities, and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. These actions have been woven into mainstream government functions such as transportation, housing, natural resources protection, and economic development.
 - Formation of oversight and coordinating bodies and councils to monitor, guide, and assist state and local government agencies, and link to the private and nonprofit sectors, both to facilitate communication and coordination horizontally across functions and issues and vertically between levels of government. These include the California Air Resources Board and the Strategic Growth Council.
 - The embracing of regions as a vital piece of state governance, both in recognition of the significant geographical, economic, and cultural differences across California and as an intermediary between the state and local governments. For 25 years, metropolitan planning organizations have been mechanisms for planning and prioritizing transportation, air quality, land use, and affordable housing investments, reinforced over the past decade by responsibilities for meeting sustainability and climate change goals.
 - Opportunities for policy entrepreneurship where individuals or organizations can explore new approaches to framing issues, pursuing system change, and building bridges across diverse perspectives. Examples mentioned in the interviews include Sunne Wright McPeak, formerly head of the Bay Area Council and Secretary of the California Business, Transportation, and Housing Agency, whom was credited as being the driver of regional approaches in the state, and Valley Vision, a nonprofit focused on collaborative approaches to tackling a range of economic and environmental challenges.
- Sacramento Area Council of Governments is regarded as a high performing regional organization. It has an engaged board of representatives from every county and city in the region, and a large and skilled staff. SACOG has a pivotal role in the allocation of Federal and state dollars for transportation and housing, which makes it a key player in the region. It was an acknowledged leader in the development of the Regional Blueprint approach statewide and is a key partner in the Regional Prosperity Strategy. One oddity is SACOG's tangential role in economic development with



the six-county region divided into four economic development districts, although the Regional Prosperity Strategy does call for SACOG to take responsibility for a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the region.

- The Rural-Urban Connections Strategy is regarded by some as an example of policy entrepreneurship on the part of SACOG and RUCS Manager, David Shabazian. It was a response to perceived shortcomings in the original Sacramento Blueprint and over the following decade developed into a nationally recognized strategy and analytical tool. Its strengths can be summarized as:
 - Through powerful data and predictive analytics, RUCS was able to shine a bright light on the importance and diversity of regional agriculture and its impact on the regional economy, something that had not previously been understood or recognized.
 - RUCS extensive outreach to farmers, processors, rural businesses and communities gave them a voice in regional decision-making and led to changes in the way transportation investments were allocated.
 - The extensive community engagement process that was part of creating the RUCS technology platform coincided with publication of Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and a growing national interest in food and agriculture. For some, RUCS was part of Sacramento and the greater Sacramento region developing a regional identity worthy of investment and pride.
 - RUCS has become the economic and environmental sustainability strategy for the rural parts of the region and a complement to the Blueprint Strategy. Its toolkit enables users to:
 - Identify inputs and outputs of the agricultural system, run scenarios that imagine market shifts or cropping changes, and identify trade-offs between competing land uses and forecast their potential outcomes
 - Access business tools, models, and business plans for regional agriculture infrastructure, such as food hubs
 - Assess overall economic impact of agriculture
 - Support land conservation and stewardship and enhance ecosystem services and working landscapes.
- The interviews raised some concerns about the future of RUCS:
 - SACOG leadership realize that RUCS is currently (and has been since the beginning) undercapitalized, and that in order to attract investment, the strategy and approach need to be refreshed. RUCS 2.0, undertaken last year, was a process of consultation and outreach to determine possible future directions. One possibility is forestry, an important issue in California, because of its economic contribution and the threat of wildfire and issues of poor forest management. However, RUCS will require significant investment to develop the new data and tools, on top of reinvestment that is urgently required to update the data upon which RUCS relies for its agricultural analysis.
 - Few of the farmers, growers, producers, or local governments had made use of the toolkit, although some recognized the power of the data and analysis in making the case for rural investment. This appears to be the heart of the issue: RUCS is both a strategy (or perhaps more accurately a way of thinking about agriculture as economic development) AND a set of analytical tools: the tools have limited value on their own, the strategy has no power without the data.



- However, there is an important missing piece. There is frustration that projects such as food hubs, which have emerged out of the consultations and outreach, and supported by the analytics and business planning tools, have yet to be implemented. RUCS needs an entrepreneurial investment partner, such as a community development financial institution (CDFI), to assemble project financing, but it seems that the CDFI infrastructure for economic development is under-developed in the Sacramento area.
- RUCS can be seen as a vehicle for collaboration among farmers, producers, processors, and governments to give a stronger voice to rural interests in the region – as a counterbalance to the continuing urban pressures for expansion across the landscape. Its part in the evolving farm-to-fork system in the Sacramento region is a strong example of rural-urban linkage as its name suggests.
- But RUCS is a project in SACOG’s portfolio, and it is SACOG where responsibility for collaboration and equity lies. Although SACOG’s Board is overwhelming white and male, the California policy and legislative context (as well that as Federal Department of Transportation) places stringent requirements for consultation, environmental justice, and equity as preconditions for funding. The regional framework allows for appropriate variation in responses to the particular social, economic, and environmental characteristics, but is not of itself a driver of collaboration and equity.



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