

Notice of Preparation

Date: February 28, 2025

To: Reference List of Recipients

From: Stacie Guzman, Executive Director
Merced County Association of Governments - Lead Agency
369 West 18th Street, Merced, CA 95340, (209) 769-7679, stacie.guzman@mcagov.org

Subject: Notice of Preparation and Scoping Meeting for a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) 2026 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)

Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) will be the Lead Agency and prepare a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the 2026 RTP/SCS. MCAG is requesting input regarding the scope and content of the environmental information, which is germane to your agency’s statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project. The public is also encouraged to provide input. The project title, location, environmental review requirements, agency background and overview, project description, and probable environmental issues to be addressed in the PEIR are attached. An Initial Study is not attached and is not required pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15060(d).

Your response is requested at the earliest possible date but not later than 30 days after receipt of this notice or by **Wednesday, April 2, 2025**. Please respond to Ms. Stacie Guzman, Executive Director, by email (preferred) or at the physical address below. Please identify the name, phone number, and email address of a contact person at your agency.

By E-Mail	By Mail
stacie.guzman@mcagov.org	369 West 18 th Street, Merced, CA 95340

The project is of regional significance; therefore, in addition to the written comments you may provide, your verbal comments regarding the preparation of the PEIR are also requested. A virtual scoping meeting will be held on **Thursday, March 20, 2025**, beginning at 11:00 AM via the Zoom platform. Please register in advance for this meeting using the following link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/O3tZCs-iQmmJZQQ1eom9tA>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

Agency and/or public input can be provided in writing before or after the Scoping Meeting until April 2, 2025. MCAG looks forward to receiving your comments regarding this important project for our region.

Attachment

Notice of Preparation and Scoping Meeting
Program Environmental Impact Report
Project Overview and Scope of Environmental Analysis
2026 Regional Transportation Plan and
Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)
February 28, 2025

Project Title

Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) 2026 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS).

Location

Within the incorporated limits of Merced County, California, including the six (6) incorporated cities (Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos, and Merced) and all unincorporated areas under the jurisdiction of the County of Merced (reference the map of Merced County on the next page identifying the area to be addressed by the PEIR and the RTP/SCS). Located in the northern portion of the San Joaquin Valley in Central California, Merced County encompasses 1,971 square miles of land. Stanislaus County bounds the county to the north, Mariposa County to the east, Madera and Fresno counties to the south, and Santa Clara and San Benito counties to the west. The 2024 population in Merced County was 293,630, according to the California State Department of Finance (DOF).

CEQA Requirements

The RTP/SCS PEIR will be prepared in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and State CEQA Guidelines. CEQA requires public agencies, such as MCAG, to consider the potential environmental impacts of the proposed 2026 RTP/SCS. The objectives of CEQA are to:

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

The environmental document will be prepared as a “Programmatic” or “Program” EIR (PEIR), which is a type of first-tier document as defined in CEQA Guidelines Sections 15152 (Tiering) and 15168 (Program EIR). A Program EIR is prepared for an agency program or series of actions that can be characterized as one large project.

Typically, such a project involves actions that are closely related geographically and are logical parts of a chain of contemplated events, rules, regulations, or plans that govern the conduct of a

continuing program with generally similar environmental effects and mitigation measures. The RTP/SCS would be such a project.

It is noted that additional environmental analysis by local jurisdictions or other agencies of individual projects contained in the 2026 RTP/SCS may be required. The tiering concept is a multi-level approach to streamlining subsequent environmental reviews. This first-tier RTP/SCS PEIR will analyze general matters (i.e., broad policies, the planned regional multi-modal transportation system, related impacts, and program-wide mitigation measures). Subsequent tiers prepared by local jurisdictions or other agencies (e.g., later EIRs and Negative Declarations) will include an analysis of narrower, subsequent projects by “incorporating by reference” the general discussions from the broader first-tier RTP/SCS PEIR. Second-tier environmental reviews will focus on the impacts of individual improvement projects that implement the RTP/SCS, related programs, and/or policies.

Regional Planning Background and Overview

MCAG is a voluntary association of local governments and is one of California’s 40 regional transportation planning agencies (RTPAs). MCAG was created in 1967 through a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) composed of elected officials of Merced County and its six (6) incorporated cities. In addition, MCAG is a designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which qualifies it for Federal transportation funding as identified in Title 23 U.S.C. Section 134 and Title 23 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 450.300. MPOs are federally designated, while the State-designated RTPAs are described under California Government Code Section 29532 et seq. MCAG is both an MPO and an RTPA.

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

According to the 2024 California Regional Transportation Planning Guidelines, prepared by the California Transportation Commission (CTC), MCAG is required to adopt and submit an updated RTP to the CTC and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) every four (4) years.

The 2026 RTP is a planning document to be developed by MCAG in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Caltrans, and other stakeholders, including transportation system users. Following the passage of *Assembly Bill 32 (AB 32) – The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006*, which specifies that by the year 2020, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within the State must be at 1990 levels, *Senate Bill 375 (SB 375) – The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008* was signed into law as the framework for achieving greenhouse gas emissions reductions from land use and transportation planning.

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

- ✓ That the California Air Resource Board (ARB) develop regional GHG emission reduction targets for cars and light trucks for each of the 18 MPOs in California, including MCAG
- ✓ During this next RTP update, MCAG must prepare an SCS that specifies how ARB's GHG emissions reduction target will be achieved. If the target cannot be met through the SCS, then an Alternative Planning Strategy (APS) shall be prepared by MCAG
- ✓ Streamlines CEQA requirements for specific residential and mixed-use developments that are consistent with the Merced County SCS or APS (as determined by ARB) to achieve the regional GHG emissions reduction target
- ✓ It requires that MCAG conduct the Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) process consistently with the RTP/SCS process and that the RHNA allocations be consistent with the development pattern in the SCS. The last RHNA planning cycle was during the 2022 RTP/SCS planning cycle. The RTP must be updated every four years, and the RHNA Plan every eight years. Therefore, every other RTP coincides with the RHNA planning process

Project Description

The project, as defined pursuant to the Public Resources Code, Section 21065, is the preparation of the 2026 RTP/SCS. MCAG is in the process of preparing the RTP/SCS as required by Section 65080 et seq., of Chapter 2.5 of the California Government Code, federal guidelines pursuant to new requirements established in the federal surface transportation reauthorization, including the “Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act of 2021 or the “Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) 2021-2026,” the “Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) 2016-2020,” the “Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Acts – 2012-2014,” Transportation Conformity for the Air Quality Attainment Plan per 40 CFR Part 51 and 40 CFR Part 93, and requirements outlined in *Assembly Bill 32*, *The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006*, and *Senate Bill 375 The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008*. Finally, the CTC has prepared guidelines (most recently adopted by the CTC in 2024) to assist in preparing the RTP/SCS.

The last comprehensive EIR on the RTP/SCS was completed in August 2022 and addressed transportation improvement projects, programs, and funding sources. The 2026 RTP/SCS will address all transportation modes, including motor vehicles, transit (commuter and local), rail (commuter and interregional), goods movement (rail freight and trucking), bicycle and pedestrian facilities, aviation systems, and transportation systems management (TSM) programs and projects considering the horizon year of 2049. In addition, the 2026 RTP/SCS will:

- ✓ Identify the region’s transportation goals, objectives, and policies
- ✓ Include the SCS, which demonstrates how the region will meet its GHG reduction targets (currently being discussed by the California Air Resources Board and the eight (8) San Joaquin Valley Regional Transportation Planning Agencies) through integrated land use and housing and transportation planning. *Once adopted by MCAG, the SCS becomes an integral part of the RTP*
- ✓ Set forth an action plan of projects and programs to address the needs consistent with goals such as those listed below from the 2022 RTP/SCS:

- **Active Transportation (Bicycle & Pedestrian):** A regional transportation system for bicyclists and pedestrians. Create a safe, connected, and integrated regional transportation system for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- **Air Quality:** Achieve air quality standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the State Air Resources Board.
- **Aviation:** Provide a fully functional and integrated air service and airport system that complements the countywide transportation system.
- **Energy:** Reduce usage of nonrenewable energy resources for transportation purposes.
- **Goods Movement:** Improve the national freight network, strengthen the ability of rural communities to access national and international trade markets, and support regional economic development.
- **Highways, Streets, and Roads:** Provide a safe and efficient regional road system that accommodates the demand for the movement of people and goods.
- **Land Use Development Patterns and Strategies:** Provide economical, long-term solutions to transportation problems by encouraging community designs that encourage walking, transit, and bicycling.
- **Outreach and Coordination:** Provide a forum for participation and cooperation in transportation planning and facilitate relationships for transportation issues that transcend jurisdictional boundaries.
- **Passenger Rail:** Provide a rail system that offers safe and reliable service for passengers.
- **Reduce Project Delivery Delays:** Efficiently use available transportation funding to expedite delivery of transportation improvements within the region, and delivery of the Measure V expenditure plan.
- **Reliability & Congestion:** Achieve a significant reduction in congestion on the National Highway System. Improve the efficiency of the surface transportation system.
- **Safety for all Roadway Users:** Achieve a significant reduction in traffic fatalities and serious injuries on all public roads.
- **Smart Infrastructure:** Coordinate, monitor, and integrate planning and programming for intelligent transportation systems (ITS), smart infrastructure, demand-responsive transportation, and automated vehicles.
- **Social Equity and Environmental Justice:** Promote and provide equitable transportation and housing options for all populations and ensure that all populations share in the benefits of transportation improvements.
- **Sustainable Communities:** Reduce per capita greenhouse gas emissions through compact growth and alternative transportation strategies. Protect and enhance the natural environment. Support vehicle electrification and the provision of electrification infrastructure in public and private parking facilities and structures. Support a vibrant and sustainable regional economy. Maximize the use of Regional Early Action Planning 2.0 funds to implement and advance efforts to reduce per capita greenhouse gas emissions.
- **System Preservation:** Maintain the existing transportation system in a state of good repair.

- **Transit:** Provide an efficient, effective, coordinated regional transit system that increases mobility for urban and rural populations, including transportation for disadvantaged persons.
- **Transportation Financing:** Develop and support financing strategies that provide for continuous implementation of the Regional Transportation Plan projects and strategies

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

Potential Chapters:

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

Potential Appendices:

- | | |
|---|---|
| A. Adoption Resolution | M. Scenario Development Overview |
| B. Response to Comments | N. Public Participation Plans |
| C. Public Notices | O. Public Engagement |
| D. SJV Interregional Goods Movement | P. Environmental Justice Analysis |
| E. RTP Checklist | Q. Regional Housing Needs Plan |
| F. Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Report | R. Valleywide Chapter |
| G. Air Quality Conformity Analysis | S. Roadway Function Classification Maps |
| H. Glossary of Terms | T. Transit Service Area Maps |
| I. Financial Revenue | U. MCAG CARB SB 375 Methodology |
| J. Regional Demographic Forecast | V. System Performance |
| K. Tier I and Tier II Project Lists | W. System Performance Report |
| L. Performance Measures and Results | |

Preliminary 2026 RTP Project Alternatives and SCS Alternative Scenarios

The following project alternatives were addressed in the 2022 RTP/SCS PEIR and will likely be revised during the development of the 2026 RTP/SCS considering local agency and public outreach and input:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ✓ No Project | ✓ Scenario 3. Conserve & Connect Merced County |
| ✓ Scenario 1. Baseline | |
| ✓ Scenario 2. Conserve Merced County | |

CEQA Streamlining (SB 375 and SB 226)

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

Environmental Issues to be Addressed in the PEIR

The programs and projects to be included in the 2026 RTP/SCS will be analyzed through the development of the PEIR. This will allow MCAG to analyze the regional or general impacts of the programs and projects. A more detailed or project-level environmental assessment (if required) of the various projects included in the RTP/SCS will be conducted by the various responsible agencies, including Caltrans, Merced County, and the cities within the Merced region, before the projects are approved for construction and implementation.

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

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

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VRPA Technologies, Inc.
February 28, 2025

Date: February 28, 2025

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