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County transportation leaders ready to oppose law proposal

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Air pollution, traffic jams and carbon dioxide know no boundaries.

That's the heart of a proposed law by state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, known as Senate Bill 375, that aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks by encouraging cities, counties and developers to build new homes and commercial projects in urban centers. Such planning would result in less time spent in a car, Steinberg spokesman Jim Evans said.

The bill also would push area governments to work at a regional level to tie transportation projects with housing and land-use projects, which county leaders say is a burden that would diminish local control over future development.

"It's one more hurdle to overcome to make a project happen," said Randy Johnson, a member of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission and mayor of Scotts Valley. "It seems it would have a less-than-practical result from something that has good intentions."

The county Regional Transportation Commission will discuss the bill at its policy workshop today and adopt a stance on it. A commission staff report recommends opposing the bill.

Steinberg's bill comes after passage of the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, known as Assembly Bill 32, which requires the state to cut carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Steinberg believes achieving the climate change goals of AB 32 can't be done without addressing land use policies in tandem with transportation. Steinberg envisions a regional "blueprint" for planning, not just individual cities and counties.

If projects fail to meet the regional planning goal, federal and state transportation funding could be denied.

County Supervisor and Commissioner Jan Beutz says Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties already collaborate on major issues through the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments but not in a way that interferes with individual decisions.

"People want their land-use decisions to be made locally," Beutz said. "I don't feel it's up to me to say to Marina, 'You must do this'. We could have a lot more litigation because a lot of people won't accept this stuff."

"I find [the bill] ominous."

Steinberg's "incentive bill" allows for loosening of the California Environmental Quality Act for developers who build such projects, Evans said.

The bill, written in 2007, is sitting in the Assembly Appropriations Committee. It must be presented for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's signature by the end of August.

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