RE: ARB CAP&TRADE AUCTION PROCEEDS 2-YEAR SPENDING PLAN

The Air Resources Board needs to spend TIME to use its influence to bring about a fundamental change in how our towns develop into cities.

There are numerous benefits that would result if our towns and cities would include an off-street pathway system in their basic urban design, but this cannot be accomplished with funding alone. Just as we have General Plan requirements to address water and sewer needs, and plan out roads, as we grow our cities, we need to have an additional requirement to plan and develop an off-street pathway system. Counties, in their General Plan updates, should also be required to interconnect their towns and cities with off-street pathway systems. Linear pathways cross many properties requiring the use of eminent domain. Locally elected officials cannot exercise eminent domain without a mandate.

Currently, many, if not most, of our towns grow gradually into cities without any planning for an off-street pathway system. When the town is small, a pathway system seems a little pointless. The town is small. When the town grows into a city, a pathway system seems a little hopeless. The town grew and allowed no room for a pathway system. Even when locally elected officials would like to have pathways, they often take the politically easy way. They simply require any new residential development to include pathways. That’s a good idea, but results in recreational pathways in the newer, richer areas of town. It does nothing for the rest of the town. When a town has been allowed to develop without planning for a city-wide pathway system, often the “best first step” is to surround the developed city with a greenbelt. A surrounding greenbelt will often connect residential areas to retail areas to industrial areas. Any future development, outside the greenbelt, would include pathways connecting to the greenbelt. And, over time, as parts of the city, inside the greenbelt, age out and are redeveloped, they can include pathways connecting to the greenbelt. The greenbelt would eventually become the “backbone” for a future city-wide interconnected pathway system, used both recreationally and for utilitarian purposes, and serving all neighborhoods, no matter what income. And, when counties interconnect their cities and towns, with off-street pathways, you could then walk or bike from any city-or-town to any other city-or-town, in California, and never leave the pathway/parkway system. Think about that! And in the process, we also will have developed state-wide migration routes for wildlife, perhaps helping some species from going extinct.

The cost for a state-wide pathway system would be distributed over many years. Since cities and counties update their General Plans every 15 years, or so, even with a new General Plan pathway requirement, some cities and counties might not even begin planning for a pathway system for 15 years or more.

Our first focus for funding could be to develop greenbelts and interconnecting pathways for the disadvantaged communities that are near Highway 99 from Stockton to Bakersfield. In addition to funding greenbelt development, perhaps a limited number of years of ongoing maintenance costs could be funded as well. The greenbelts surrounding the towns would provide some protection from wind-born agricultural pesticides and protection from agricultural pesticide runoff. The pathway systems would provide a “way to work” for people who may have a hard time affording a car and car insurance but could afford a bike. A pathway system would be an economic stimulus, for the town, as it is being built, and would continue to be an economic stimulus if we tapped out the “tourism” prospects.

What if the interconnected pathways, connecting all of the cities from Bakersfield to Stockton, and then continuing north along the Sacramento River all the way to Redding, were identified as a State Park. With weather that’s quite nice most of the year, a terrain that’s relatively flat, a State Park, running the length of the State, would attract walkers and bikers from all over. The disadvantaged communities, along Highway 99, would benefit from the tourists who come to walk or bike the north/south State Parkway. Plus, these tourists would have a light footprint on the environment since the attraction is “active transportation”. The fact that State Park rangers have police officer status may be an added benefit. This increased police presence may be a benefit in some communities to ensure safety and to ensure the perception of safety. This linear State Park, and also the interconnecting County pathways, could be used to educate the public regarding environmental issues and accomplishments. For example, if the north/south State Parkway ran along the Yolo-By-Pass, there would be a sign explaining how rice is grown and its economic importance to the local community. The sign would explain the different seasons for rice, how the Yolo-By-Pass is flooded, and looks like a giant lake, in the winter to prevent Sacramento from flooding but later in the season, you will see the green rice peaking above the blue water. And in the fall, we used to burn the rice thatch putting carbon in the air, but have developed better farming techniques and now leave the rice thatch, which serves as a seasonal habitat for thousands of birds representing hundreds of species. The sign would identify the species of birds most likely to be seen for the convenience of those coming specifically to bird watch.

The city greenbelts, which could and should be identified as city parks, would provide residents with a close place to walk and bike. In a 2002 California State survey of residents’ favorite recreational activities, 91% of the respondents indicated they liked to “walk near their home for exercise”. That was the number one response. A greenbelt, and ultimately a city-wide, interconnected pathway system for our cities, will give people a place to walk near their home. Go with the flow. The people want to walk.

Our urban greenbelts and pathway systems will provide greenery that helps clean the air, and will give runoff protection from agricultural pesticides. Disabled people will get access to an urban forest, access to that “country feel”, so often missing in urban areas and so often unavailable to those who are disabled. Pathway systems are wheelchair accessible and can easily be adapted for the blind as well. Older people, who can no longer drive, will be able to get around town on adult tricycles and keep their sense of independence. Property values will increase as people find it nice to live near the “country”. Local farmers, originally resistant with thoughts of vandalism, theft and litter, will find it lucrative to sell “locally grown” produce in the towns’ local stores as they find tourists are more likely to buy a pound bag of locally grown almonds than an ashtray with the town’s name on it.

Perhaps most important, our kids and our grandkids, and then their kids and their grandkids, will develop healthy walking and biking habits from an early age. Our pathway systems, interweaved into our cities’ basic urban design, will encourage walking and biking to school, biking to work, walking and jogging for exercise, skating on weekends for fun, biking to the store for bread and milk, and any number of healthy active ways to safely get around town. People who have “opposing” bumper stickers may find common interests as they meet while walking their dogs. A sense of community, and “ownership”, may develop as volunteer groups are formed and trained to handle the simpler maintenance tasks along the greenbelt. This increased exercise, this increased belonging, and simply being so near the “country” will result in our residents leading healthier lives, both mentally and physically. Our residents will again begin living longer lives.

In the first two-year plan, ARB dreamed of projects that would be “transformational”. This plan would be transformational. If we don’t begin including pathway systems as part of our towns’ and cities’ basic urban design this year, then what year would be better to begin?

Submitted by Rodney B. Higgins

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