

Community Forum Highlights:

Can Local Success Save Our State?

May 19, 2009 – Fresno Convention Center

On May 19 *California Forward*, the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley and the Fresno Business Council jointly convened a forum in the Fresno Convention Center with 120 regional business, government, academic, community and nonprofit leaders to discuss how local innovations are changing “business as usual” in the Valley. The meeting was based on four San Joaquin Valley success stories as examples of how local and regional collaborative initiatives (the Regional Jobs Initiative, the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, the Human Investment Initiative and the Metro Rural Loop Project) have succeeded in creating multi-sector, multi-government networks to improve the economy, environment and social services in the San Joaquin Valley. The stories provided a stepping off point to reflect on how success happens and the implications and opportunities for state/local governance reform.

California Forward presented its new *Framework for a Better California* and solicited participants’ reactions to the concept of bringing government closer to the people and structuring state and local responsibilities around community and regional priorities as a pathway to reform. Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingen closed the evening with a call to action to all local leaders to stay involved and to hold one another accountable for excellence.

Panel on Valley Innovations

Attendees were welcomed by Pete Weber, board member of the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley (CPSJV) and Bruce McPherson, former Secretary of State and a member of *California Forward*’s Leadership Council. Jim Mayer, Executive Director of *California Forward*, provided background on the organization’s bipartisan approach to governance reform. Kurt Madden, Chair of the Fresno County Economic Development Corporation, then led a 15-member panel in a recounting of the interrelated success stories that have unfolded over the past seven to nine years.



Some of the specific successes cited by the panel included: the generation of 17,000 additional jobs; the creation of 11 industry clusters – including the development of a world class water technology center; the financial and academic turnaround at Fresno Unified; the development – via Executive Order forming the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley – of a comprehensive approach to stimulate the region’s economy; the transformation of the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) from a reactive social service agency to proactive business resource, and collaboration of all Valley WIBs on workforce and economic development linkages; the introduction of programs that address the whole family when tackling poverty and unemployment; and the attraction of major resources for air quality, Highway 99 and clean energy.

May 19 Panelists:

Keith Bergthold

City of Fresno Planning Department

Mike Dozier

Director, California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley

Steve Geil

CEO, Fresno County Economic Development Corporation

Mike Hanson

Superintendent, Fresno Unified School District

Paul Johnson

E. D., San Joaquin Valley Clean Energy Organization

Blake Konczal

Director, Fresno County Workforce Investment Board

Claude Laval

Chairman, Laval Corporation

Luisa Medina

Central California Legal Services

Deborah Nankivell

CEO, Fresno Business Council

Ken Newby

Chair, Fresno Business Council

Jeff Rowe

Director, Stanislaus County Workforce Investment Board

Seyed Sadredin

E. D., San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

Travis Sheridan

Central Valley Business Incubator

Laura Fultz Stout

Coalition for Clean Air

Peter Weber

Board Member, California Partnership
for the San Joaquin Valley

The panelists shared candid thoughts about how they approached these collaborative projects – some with initial skepticism. All affirmed the benefit of bringing together leaders across sectors. These themes were echoed by multiple panelists:

- Having a clearly defined shared problem – such as the need to tackle poverty and high unemployment rates as structural problems – supported by research and data such as the Choosing Our Future report about Fresno Unified School District
- The benefit of private sector leadership in partnership with public sector and higher education; persistent and passionate leaders
- The cumulative impact of “so many positive people; we can believe in ourselves again”
- People sharing information in a non-territorial way; not worrying about who gets the credit if we all benefit
- Industry leaders breaking down silos, opening the path for innovation
- Good ideas flourishing in relational networks
- Collaboration is now the ‘status quo’ and standard way of doing business
- The power of collaborative infrastructure and the ability to speak with one voice as a community and a region in being able to secure state and federal resources
- The importance of shared values as a contract for behavior in the civic sector



Group Discussion About Lessons Learned

Participants were seated at 15 tables that were assigned to one of the four main success stories or a specific “substory.” They were asked to reflect on three questions: a) what needed to change; b) what were the key strategies for success; and c) which of these strategies could be transferable. Responses were shared via brief report outs, sheets summarizing each table’s discussion and individual comments on participant worksheets. Participant feedback was very consistent independent of which success story was the focus of the table’s conversation.

What Had to Change

- The realization that collaboration was needed to address issues long held to be too intractable; a shift from a balkanized culture to effective private-public partnerships
- A critical mass of community leaders wanting change; stopped waiting for “authority” to step in
- The shift to thinking regionally and working across political jurisdictions
- New communication methods
- Need for a bridge between sectors

Key Success Strategies

- Shared definition of the problem and a shared vision, while understanding others’ views
- Addressing problems at a geographic scale defined by the nature of the problem, rather than by political jurisdictions
- Building trust around shared community values; transparency
- High caliber champions; open-minded leadership; stepping out of comfort zones
- The right people got involved – proactively visiting all stakeholders
- Appreciation on the part of some elected leaders of the power of networked government that engages stakeholders in the solution to problems
- Institutional leadership and capacity at CSU Fresno and staff support
- Based on business demand/client needs
- Breaking down silos
- “Loose-leaf” plans that were amended often as more was learned during implementation
- Leaders who set aside egos, rigid philosophies and embraced the opportunity to bring diverse viewpoints together. Much of this leadership came from the private sector as business leaders began to understand their role as stewards and tangible benefits of collaboration became visible.
- Setting measurable goals; accountability
- Relentless perseverance
- Data-based decision-making



What's Transferable

- Fresno is taking control of our own destiny; state “gets out of the way” and supports local strategies
- Multi-partisan/nonpartisan leadership
- Get multiple agencies at the table; working across silos; networked government that crosses horizontal and vertical jurisdictional lines
- Public-private initiatives
- Emphasis on collaboration, listening and acting
- Good thorough planning
- Regional focus
- Commitment to outcomes
- Leadership that articulates a vision of optimism
- Create an environment where state elected officials can come to the middle without negative outcome; suggestion to start talking about this to the gubernatorial candidates



Despite these successes, the local leaders noted that there are still challenges for the work they are doing. For example, the unemployment rate which had dropped to 8 to 9 percent is now back up to 17 percent due to changes in the economy. Several talked about wanting stronger, deeper connections with diverse community members, especially low income families. Others indicated a desire for greater participation from local elected officials.

Implications About State/Local Governance Reform

California Forward's Executive Director Jim Mayer noted that the group's thinking about the factors of local success and which factors could be transferable was consistent with the organization's emerging thinking about how to restructure state and local government to support community and regionally-driven strategies. He shared the outline of a *Framework for a Better California* with the following key features:

- More autonomy for municipal services – increased local control over revenues; performance measures for increased accountability
- Shared resources for community strategies, i.e. issues that need community-wide support such as education, health and social services and crime reduction
- Regions have role in facilitating economic prosperity
- New focus for the Executive Branch to support regional and community strategies
- Redesigning legislative activity to support regions



Overall reaction to the framework was quite positive. It resonated with these leaders' belief that authority and "accountability should be placed at the level that can best impact the problem" and that the communities and regions can lead better than the state on many issues. They were in agreement about the proposed shifts in the role of the state executive branch and the concept of regional delegations for the Legislature.

Representative comments affirming *California Forward's* framework:

- Regional/community strategies "prevent government from giving a 'one size fits all.'"
- "Local autonomy, authority, resources and responsibility – as close to needs as possible."
- "Maximizing the amount of dollars that reach clients versus how much is eaten up by multiple jurisdictions."
- "We've tended to centralize even when local communities have good solutions."
- "Legislators should work in regional delegations versus as Republican or Democrat."

Participants shared a range of suggestions for the framework:

- Break down local silos first; need to create greater collaboration/reduce conflicts between Board of Supervisors, City Councils and agencies
 - Get the Councils of Governments working together
 - Provide incentives and resources (re-allocation) for collaboration
 - Rethink structural impediments to political participation (e.g. Brown Act) in collaborative planning, debate and action
 - Agree on what will be measured
 - Make sure that the system is accessible and transparent to average citizens
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- Provide tax incentives to prompt innovation with a focus on regional solutions
 - Educate the Legislature about regions that do collaborate regularly – promote as best practices
 - Work through existing regional agencies; encourage efforts like the CA Partnership
 - Include tax rates, energy, water resource management, schools, and the prison system in regional authority
 - Broaden the discussion to look at special assessment districts, which are no longer efficient
 - Revisit the Joint Powers Agreement model and see what other options might be better
 - The state modifies rules that dictate how locals can collaborate
 - Let residents create their own "associative units" to redraw county lines
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- Consider a half time or unicameral legislature
 - Allow legislators to be voted on by any registered voter, not just those in their party
 - Have legislators focus on community issues and values rather than partisan issues

The assembled leaders also shared a few cautionary comments: “Do not approach regionalization as another layer of government” and ensure that the system is designed to increase, rather than decrease, accountability. “Don’t create a new level in resource scarce times.” “The choice between macro and micro is a false choice. We need both.” Several noted that the community and region-driven approach requires competent leadership and it’s the people, not the systems, that have led and made the difference in the Valley successes: “The successes in the Fresno region were initiated by private citizens and groups of private citizens, not by the government... Government reform is key but more citizen involvement as stewards is essential. Stimulate/encourage citizens/business/private sector to be more active in solving community issues.”

Closing Comments/Next Steps

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingen, who had been active in several aspects of the success stories shared earlier, called upon the participants to continue to work together for more progress. She said that there are “no more excuses”; no matter what happens at the state level, local leaders can take action. Looking at all levels, Valley leaders can reach up to the state-level work being led by *California Forward* as well as be active locally. She recommends humanizing the conversation because real people are impacted every day by the issues; as well, recognize the public’s common sense. The meeting sponsors thanked all of the participants for being so generous with their time.



Meeting Evaluation

Overall, participants indicated that they found the meeting worthwhile and enjoyed the opening video, panel presentation and presentation of *California Forward's* framework. Some suggested that the meeting was sharing information familiar to participants and could have benefited from more focus on a specific proposal and/or a broader audience. Most of the participants were familiar with the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. Of those completing meeting evaluations, about a third were not particularly familiar with the Regional Jobs Initiative, about half were learning about the Human Investment Initiative and close to two-thirds were not familiar with the Metro Rural Loop Project.

Participants were asked about the likelihood of significant change at the local, regional and state level. Those responding indicated high levels of optimism for change at the local level, and only slightly lower but still strong belief in change at the regional level. At the state level, answers were in the middle – neither agreeing nor disagreeing. *California Forward* is committed to change at *all* three levels and is deeply grateful to all of the participants for their potential partnership. Please send additional thoughts or suggestions to *California Forward's* Coalitions Director Dennis Quirin at DQuirin@caforward.org.



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