

## **Presidential Perspectives, Engaging a Region to Transform Its Future**

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On July 11, 2011, Fresno California was designated as one of the six initial communities for the Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) initiative, a new and customized pilot project by the Obama administration to strengthen local capacity and spur economic growth in local communities. A team of federal administrators representing the Environmental Protection Agency (PA), the Economic Development Agency (EDA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Transportation (DOT), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) will work with local governments, the private sector, and other institutions to leverage federal dollars and support the work being done at the local level to encourage community development. Federal administrators will be on site and housed at Fresno City Hall. By integrating government investments and partnering with local communities, SC2 channels the resources of the federal government to help empower cities with established planning and strong leadership as they develop and implement their vision for economic growth. This designation culminates years of work by region leaders to align resources and build a network to transform a region.

Fresno began its path to good planning and strong leadership with the establishment of Fresno State's Futures Institute in 1991. Co-founded by the President of California State University, Fresno, John Welty, the Fresno Business Council (FBC) brought together key leaders within the private sector who were committed to transformation of the community. Fresno was experiencing a continuing rise in crime, low per capita income and high unemployment, a fragmented and often combative community, and a vacuum of steward leadership. The University adopted a vision statement stating "We will become New California's premier engaged university, nationally recognized for our teaching, learning, transformational scholarship, and dynamic leadership which engages faculty, students, staff, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration benefiting the region and society as a whole."

The FBC sought to improve underlying conditions in key domains defined by many as the three E's – economy, environment and equity. In Fresno, these were defined as four Spheres: Economic Development, Infrastructure Development, Human Development, and the Whole, where the reality of interdependence and steward leadership guides the thinking. The focus was

on shifting the economy from a primarily low cost, single industry model to a more diversified set of industries driving innovation. Since 1991, Fresno State has been the leading partner with the FBC, in creating and implementing the Fresno Regional Jobs Initiative (RJI) and the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley (Partnership), each of which rely on stewardship building and collaboration.

Established in 2003, the RJI leads the continued implementation of the innovative regional economic development. Administered by the Office of Community and Economic Development (OCED), this comprehensive strategy involves industry, government, education, training, and community leaders creating strategic initiatives that leverage regional assets for fundamental change. RJI is a partnership between private businesses and public/non-profit agencies centered around 12 industry clusters. RJI was credited with bringing sectors together to assist in the generation of over 17,000 jobs.

The California Partnership was created by Governor Schwarzenegger in 2005 to address the many issues and obstacles facing eight counties, 62 cities, and 4 million residents within the 27,000 square mile San Joaquin Valley. OCED is the Partnership Secretariat. The Partnership convenes experts and leaders committed to sustainable economic development, environmental stewardship and human advocacy. OCED and the California Partnership received, coordinated or assisted in securing \$5.5 billion in State and Federal funding for the Valley; established the Central California Workforce Collaborative; created two 501©(3) organizations (the San Joaquin Valley Clean Energy Organization and the San Joaquin Valley Housing Collaborative); established the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium; and completed the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint, a guide for future Valley to the year 2050, including 12 Smart Growth Principles.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, said it best - “This federal effort recognizes the value of the strategic planning that we’ve already begun to revitalize in our economy and our city. We’ve made significant progress in our efforts, but there is still much more to be done”