

# Opinion

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THE FRESNO BEE  
FOUNDED IN 1922 BY CARLOS K. McCLATCHY  
OUR VIEW

## Challenges, opportunities confront Valley in 2008

Issues of jobs, environment, schools require vision and determination.

**T**here are many reasons to face the new year with trepidation. The economy is struggling — some think it's already in recession. Air quality continues to be a problem. Water issues — both quality and quantity — loom overhead. State government is increasingly unmanageable, with consequences for local governments and their citizens.

But such challenges often offer opportunities. It's a time for new visions, new solutions and a renewal of the determined spirit that once animated the Golden State.

### Economic development

More and better jobs are always a crucial need in the Valley. Our ag-based economy is rich, but it is also subject to the vagaries of climate, consumer demand and geopolitics. A more diverse economy would be stronger and more predictable.

One place to start is with our problems. We can turn our air quality issues into an opportunity by creating a research and manufacturing sector that addresses air pollution. Where better to seek and build solutions to dirty air than the dirtiest air basin in the nation? Some of this work is already under way. More is needed. Similarly, there are efforts already in motion to create an industry around the need to better manage and conserve water, a vital but threatened resource.

### Schools and the work force

A better labor force is a concomitant of economic development. Too often we hear employers complain that well-paying jobs go unfilled because of a lack of qualified candidates. Busi-

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nesses seeking to expand or relocate in the Valley find a shortage of people with the skills demanded by 21st-century enterprises.

The solution begins in the schools. We must have an increased emphasis on what we once called vocational education — training young people for the jobs that exist and the ones we hope to have in the future.

We must also keep a strong focus on the dropout crisis in many Valley schools. Dropouts represent an utter failure on the part of both individuals and society. Without education, young people are usually condemned to poverty, poor health and prison. That ends up costing the rest of us much more than what we might spend to give them a good shot at success in school and afterward.

### A better environment

We have made some progress on cleaning up the air, and it's been costly in many ways. But the grim fact is that most of what we've done to this point has been the easy stuff. Now it gets harder.

The hardest part of all will be using our cars less and creating alternative transportation. We say we want cleaner air, but we do little to limit the greatest source of air pollution — vehicle emissions.

There are many places to start, but one of the best is to support the bond measure on the November ballot that would fund the beginning of a high-speed rail system for California. Not

only would this be a boost for clean air efforts — taking many thousands of cars off the highways — but it would be an economic bonanza for the Valley.

Budget woes in Sacramento may be used as an excuse to pull the measure from the ballot, as has happened twice before. That can't be allowed to happen. No single step will do more for cleaner air than building high-speed rail.

### Better planning

Planning and land use issues will be at the front of many debates in 2008. The way we've grown in the past has led to many of today's problems with air pollution, traffic congestion and decaying older neighborhoods. That has to change. Fortunately, there is already a solid understanding of that among many planning professionals. The problem is getting that message to elected leaders and the larger public.

Voters must support candidates who understand that planning is a regional issue, not a task carried out in a vacuum by cities and counties. Denser urban environments, as contemplated in downtown Fresno, are a must. The Valley's population is growing faster than the rest of the state's, and we can no longer afford to simply build ever outward, swallowing productive farm land and putting even greater strains on water and other resources.

### A higher quality of life

We can't ignore the impact of public ameni-

ties in building communities that can support economic development and opportunity. Parks, museums, recreation, entertainment, cultural activities — all play a role in the health of vibrant and vital region. These are not fills bought at great cost of public funds. They are investments that pay huge dividends. Voters and elected officials alike must understand that as they make difficult decisions.

one of this will be easy. California faces huge budget deficits, and that will land squarely on the necks of city and county treasuries. Recent history suggests we can't expect much help from Sacramento, where the entire focus is on pleasing special interests and fundraising for the next election.

That makes the tasks ahead even harder for local officials and residents. But Fresno and Valley voters have shown that they're willing to shoulder a heavier burden — to pay for schools, roads, a zoo, libraries — when the case is compelling.

Leaders who appeal to those values will serve us much better than those who would demagogue the issues and divide us. We're likely to be on our own much of the time in 2008. The good news is that we've been in that situation before, and managed to survive. Let our better instincts prevail, and let our hope for a better future guide us.

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