REPORT

DATE: October 10, 2005

TO: Community, Economic and Human Development Committee
Energy and Environment Committee
Transportation and Communications Committee

FROM: Regional Comprehensive Plan Task Force
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SUBJECT: Regional Comprehensive Plan Proposed Approach

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S APPROVAL:

RECOMMENDED ACTION:
Recommend that the Regional Council approve the proposed approach.

SUMMARY
Staff, under the direction of the Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP)Task Force, has completed preliminary products for the RCP based on a work plan approved by the Regional Council in October 2004. That work plan focused on the compilation of existing SCAG policies and the formulation of action plans to implement those policies. As reported to the policy committees on September 8, the RCP Task Force has been considering expanding the original work plan to include several new efforts. At this time, the Task Force is proposing that the policy committees recommend the new approach to the Regional Council. The plan resulting from this effort will be adequate to serve as a test case for the role of regional planning within the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), but it will also be a useful and effective plan in the absence of successful CEQA reform legislation.

BACKGROUND:
The proposed expanded RCP effort has been developed in light of on-going CEQA reform discussions. Those discussions suggest that a regional plan meeting specific criteria could qualify subsequent, consistent plans and projects for alternative processing under CEQA. SCAG has viewed this concept as an opportunity to ease the development process for projects included in, or consistent with, the region's adopted growth vision (2% Strategy).

To date, no broad agreement on CEQA reform has been reached. As such, this proposal is an attempt to approach the RCP as an opportunity to develop a test case for regional plans that could subsequently be useful should CEQA reform proceed. The proposed new approach would add the following activities to plan development:

- Establish quantifiable plan outcomes across the full range of planning and resource categories.
- Demonstrate measurable benefit for the environment.
- Include mitigation measures that are applicable at the project level.

- Propose funding and other incentive mechanisms for supportive implementation at the local level.
- To the extent possible, fully incorporate resource and infrastructure plans prepared at the regional and state level. When full integration is not possible, SCAG will perform an analysis of these external plans demonstrating whether they are consistent with the region's growth strategy.

Plan Integration/Open Space and Habitat

The ability to fully incorporate elements of other State and regional plans will depend on a variety of factors including the timing of planning processes, the willingness of outside agencies to collaborate, and whether, as in some cases, planning activities are exempt from CEQA. At this time, staff envisions placing special emphasis on the Habitat and Open Space Chapter. To that end, staff has held discussions with the State Resources Agency regarding collaboration.

The Habitat and Open Space Chapter will include the following elements:

- Identification of the characteristics of land that should not be developed based on a "natural systems" approach
- Identification of suggested amount, type and location of parkland within urban settings
- Identification of measures to mitigate habitat impacts of transportation projects
- Identification of financial mechanisms to accrue funding for open space protection
- Analysis of existing State plans for open space, habitat, and parks. Specific recommendations for future planning efforts based on consistency with the region's desired outcomes.

Local Implementation/Incentives

There is broad agreement within on-going CEQA reform discussions that project streamlining should be implemented only at the option of the local jurisdiction. Further, there is also broad agreement that the procedural steps within CEQA should be preserved within any streamlined alternative. The concept of streamlining is to redirect effort and analysis currently done within project Environmental Impact Reports to advance planning. To date, there is no specific, detailed proposal on CEQA streamlining. Based on previous Regional Council action, SCAG would oppose any proposal that limited a local jurisdiction's discretion in project review and approval.

At the same time, SCAG will endeavor to develop proposals that would make alternative CEQA procedures attractive to local agencies. Specifically, there should be incentive funding and mitigation funding available to local agencies that agree to preference projects consistent with the regional growth strategy. SCAG will include specific proposals for incentive approaches within the RCP.

FISCAL IMPACT:

No fiscal impact at this time. Any work related to this item is included in the 2005-2006 Overall Work Program for the Regional Comprehensive Plan (06-035). Additionally, staff anticipates enhancing the RCP budget with previously unprogrammed funds, subject to future consideration by the Administration Committee and the Regional Council.