

Students offer view of county's future

By Aaron Burgin, The Porterville Recorder

Young adults and their elders share several key values, but differ on a number of others, when it comes to the future of Tulare County, county officials said.

The groups agree that clean air, more affordable housing, better paying jobs and better health care are high priorities, according to the results of a survey performed by county Blueprint Program officials.

Their opinions diverged on other issues, such as having a more vibrant economy, more entertainment and cultural choices or increasing the county's water supply.

"Some of the responses surprised us," said Elizabeth Wright, an official with the Tulare County Association of Governments. "But for the most part, the similarities and differences could be chalked up to age, and divergent viewpoints."

The Tulare County Blueprint is the document that, when completed, will guide countywide transportation and land-use planning for the next 50 years.

Blueprint Program officials presented 196 students at College of the Sequoias and 51 of the county's top stakeholders with a list of 18 values, and asked them to prioritize them.

Responses from the surveys and other meetings will help officials draft the document.

The No. 1 value for the political-science students was improving streets and highways, followed by clean air, more well-paying jobs, increased affordable housing and better health care.

Increased affordable housing was the top priority for the group of stakeholders, with a more vibrant economy, clean air, more well-paying jobs and better health care following in that order.

Then, there were the disagreements.

Issues such as better entertainment and cultural options and a world-class education system, which ranked high on the students list, were ranked lower by the stakeholders.

Rosa Lopez, 24, a student at Porterville College, said she could see why those values would rank higher with students rather than stakeholders.

"Adults already have a job, a family, schedule and are more established, and with students, they have more time for entertainment," Lopez said. "With students, its easy to understand why they would want better educational choices, and with the stakeholders, they probably already have completed their education."

For stakeholders, water issues, including more water supply and better protection of lakes and waterways, were of prime importance. The feeling, according to the survey results, was not reciprocated by the students.

This didn't surprise Matt Davis, a 51-year-old PC employee, who said priorities change with age.

"Generally, issues like water, the economy, are more important to adults who are looking at these issues closer," Davis said. "When those students get older, you'll see those priorities shift."

And finally, the surprises.

The student's top priority, improved roads, ended up as No. 10 on the stakeholders' list, and the stakeholders' No. 2 value, a more vibrant economy, was 14th on the students list.

Jeff Keele, a political science professor at PC, said he would expect students to have more of an interest in the economy, and adults to put more emphasis on improved infrastructure.

"One would think that the stakeholders would recognize the economic cost of having inadequate transportation and the benefits of having well maintained and well-preserved infrastructure," Keele said. "And you would also expect students, who will be looking for jobs in the near future, to be concerned about the economy."

Wright, who administered the survey to the students, pointed out that the students did see the need for better-paying jobs as a priority.

"And in most of our programs, better roads has polled surprisingly low with adults, even after the passage of Measure R," Wright said. "What we have seen from both students and stakeholders is that personal health and well being are the most important values to people, and everything else follows."

Thus, better air quality, affordable housing and better health care were high priorities shared by both groups, Wright said.

"These are things we all can agree on, regardless of age," Wright said.

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