Focus On Food Yields Surprising Facts:
The American people are paying more attention to food today than they have in decades. The cost of food continues to increase and stories seem to appear almost weekly about children made sick by consuming contaminated vegetables, milk products, and other commodities. The obesity crisis has brought many to reconsider their dietary choices, and public health professionals are pointing out that healthy food is not even available in many low-income neighborhoods.

There is yet another problem related to the way we get our food, one that has been largely unrecognized. Modern agriculture contributes more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than almost anything else we do. This is a result of the use of chemical fertilizers (made from natural gas), pesticides (made from petroleum), farm machinery, food processing, packaging and transportation. It now takes 10 calories of fossil-fuel energy to produce a single calorie of supermarket food. Author Michael Pollan has summarized the situation thusly: “When we eat from the industrial food system, we are eating oil and spewing greenhouse gases.”

While we struggle to address the threat of global warming as well as find sources of healthy and affordable food for our communities, it helps to realize that it doesn’t require any fossil fuels to produce fruits and vegetables. All the energy required comes directly from the sun.

According to Pollan, we can “resolarize” the food system by building the infrastructure for a regional food economy — one that can support diversified farming and, by shortening the food chain, reduce the amount of fossil fuel in the American diet. Doing so would have the added benefits of providing fresh, more nutritious food, and more food security.

Pollan suggests that government encourage and assist the production of food on any available patch of land. California’s Secretary of Agriculture, A.G. Kawamura, illustrates the viability of this practice – he reports that his family’s agriculture business has made use of vacant lots as a place to grow produce, supplementing what the family grows on their much larger land holdings. During World War II, U.S. residents grew 40% of their food in Victory Gardens. Today, the City of San Francisco is growing produce in front of City Hall and donating the harvest to local food banks.

Local governments can also help by finding food that is produced locally. Government-supported hospitals, schools, and other institutions could be asked to change their purchasing practices to support local products. Farmers markets and community-supported agriculture could be encouraged. And restaurants using local produce could be publicly recognized.

San Francisco’s Mayor Gavin Newsom recently asked the American Farmland Trust and others to determine whether the residents of his city could satisfy all their food needs with food produced within a 100-mile radius of San Francisco. The answer was an overwhelming “yes.” This region produces 20 million tons of food annually, including more than 80 different commodities, while the entire Bay Area consumes a mere 5.9 million tons of food a year, most of which is not purchased from local sources.

San Francisco residents are increasing their purchases of local products — sales of locally produced food in the City has grown 9% a year from 1997 to 2002. The Mayor has formed a task force of experts to determine how this trend might be dramatically increased. One idea already suggested was to use land owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to grow food, then offer residents subscriptions to weekly delivery of fresh vegetables: a city-supported version of community-supported agriculture.

Eating locally has also become a national phenomenon. All over the country, upscale restaurants feature dishes made with local produce, and markets for organic, local, pasture-based foods are thriving as never before. National sales of organic foods grew 18% annually between 1997 and 2002. The international “slow food” movement (a reaction to fast food) is growing in popularity in this country.

This is an idea whose time has come for every income level and political constituency. Writing of the movement back to local food economies, traditional foods, and more sustainable farming, The American Conservative magazine editorialized last summer that “this is a conservative cause if ever there was one.”
SB 375—What Does it Mean to Local Government? Receiving widespread attention, Governor Schwarzenegger has proclaimed SB 375, "the most sweeping revision of land use policies since Governor Ronald Reagan signed the California Environmental Quality Act." An editorial in the Orange County Register called it, "one of the most authoritarian, far-reaching and elitist bills that has ever made it to the governor's desk." On the other hand, Ventura Councilmember and noted planner Bill Fulton says, "it's less than revolutionary on the land use front, largely because it's incentive-based."

Summary of primary components of SB 375:
1. Creates regional targets for greenhouse gas emissions reduction tied to land use. These targets will be established by the CA Air Resources Board (CARB) under the guidance of an advisory committee made up of local government entities and others.

2. Requires regional planning agencies to create a plan to meet CARB's targets. These regional plans will be called the "sustainable communities strategy." They are subject to certification by CARB to assure that regions' plans can actually meet the required greenhouse gas reduction targets.

However, the law also states that local governments are not required to change their general plans to be consistent with the region's sustainable communities strategy and that the legislation does not remove local land use authority.

3. Requires that regional transportation funding decisions be consistent with the sustainable communities strategy. (Since the federal government requires that transportation plans submitted for federal funding reflect city and county general plans, it is unclear how this measure will be implemented.)

4. Couples regional transportation planning with local government housing plans. SB 375 extends the requirement to update housing elements from the current five years to eight years, synchronizing the housing element timeline with the timeline of every other regional transportation plan. The legislation also requires local government to actually zone the land needed for future affordable housing rather than simply pointing out where it will be located.

5. Provides CEQA exemptions and/or permit streamlining to residential and mixed use residential development projects that conform to the region's sustainable communities strategy certified by CARB. Specifically, these projects will not have to analyze growth-inducing impacts, greenhouse gas emissions, or impacts on the regional transportation network, and will be exempted from providing traffic mitigation measures if the local jurisdiction has adopted traffic mitigation ordinances.

Although local governments don't have to conform their local general plans to the regional sustainable communities plan, the theory here is that the developers who want CEQA exemptions will encourage local governments to amend their general plans to enable them to get a CEQA-exempt project approved by a city council or county board of supervisors.

There remain multiple questions about how SB 375 is actually going to work and much in the bill that is not specified. For instance, can local governments receive transportation funds even if they don't modify their general plans to be consistent with the regional sustainable communities plan? What if a regional government has not adopted a sustainable communities plan — will local governments in that region qualify for transportation funds? Will other state and federal funds be linked to conformity with a sustainable communities strategy? Clarifying legislation is likely to be introduced next year to resolve this and many other unclear and/or unresolved issues.

The bottom line of SB 375 is clear. This law offers a structure under which local and regional governments can most effectively address climate change and vehicle-related emissions. However, the law itself won't lead to sweeping changes unless the state, regional planning agencies, local governments, and developers decide that it is worth making it work.

Even local governments that are not concerned about climate change should be interested in complying with SB 375 because its implementation could have advantages far beyond controlling greenhouse gas emissions.

According to Jonathan Miller, author of the Urban Land Institute's annual report, "Emerging Trends in Real Estate," we need a new generation of infrastructure building that will enable us to compete with more advanced European and Asian networks, one that links two critical goals — enhanced mobility and efficiency.

We must emphasize reducing oil dependency and creating a lighter environmental footprint that matches the carbon-reducing demands of the times. Regional planning that integrates highways, transit, rail and airport planning for multi-modal, inter-regional solutions must be combined with local land use planning that reduces car dependency.

According to Miller, the principle is simple: To pay our existing bills, we need a growing economy. Infrastructure is a leading way to do that. California's SB 375 offers the framework.

Quote of the Month: The Orange County Register calls SB 375, "one of the most authoritarian, far-reaching and elitist bills that has ever made it to the governor's desk, a piece of environmental extremism that's designed to make it more difficult for Californians to be able to live in a single-family home."