



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
June 17, 2005

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Lawsuit prompts Santa Barbara County to dedicate funds for farm worker transportation

Services to begin March 2006

As a result of a lawsuit, the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) dedicated state transportation funds to serve public transportation needs of Santa Barbara County farm workers. The new service will start in March 2006 in the Santa Maria Valley.

The lawsuit, filed in 2004 by David Pierce, Jesus Estrada and Our Children's Earth Foundation, challenged SBCAG's historic practice of allowing the cities of Santa Maria and Lompoc, and the county of Santa Barbara to divert state Transportation Development Act (TDA) funds to fix roads instead of providing much needed transit services to thousands of strawberry workers who have few transportation choices.

"Transit systems throughout Santa Barbara County are under-funded, and desperately need all the transit funds that they are entitled to," said Tiffany Schauer, executive director of Our Children's Earth, one of the plaintiffs.

The state allocates over \$13 million dollars annually to Santa Barbara County for public transportation purposes, but the Cities of Santa Maria, Lompoc and the County of Santa Barbara divert over \$3 million of those funds to their Public Works Department budgets for road maintenance.

Although the lawsuit has not been formally resolved, SBCAG has taken a number of steps that respond to issues identified in the litigation and by the plaintiffs. SBCAG and the county and City of Santa Maria decided to fund and start a farm worker transportation program by March 2006. The three agencies will dedicate at least \$150,000 in TDA funds to study and implement a farm worker transportation system. That system may involve busses or vans or some other type of vehicle, depending on the conclusions of the study.

There are 12,000 to 18,000 farm workers in Santa Barbara County, and the largest numbers and concentration are in the Santa Maria Valley. On average, farm laborers earn less than half the income of other jobs in the County. While SBCAG and County transit operators have sponsored and funded other commuter services addressing the needs of specific industries and large employers, farm workers' requests have not been heeded for several years, despite efforts by various groups, including Santa Barbara County Action Networks (SBCAN) and several Mixtec organizations demonstrating the need for farm laborer transportation services.

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