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PROFILE | CAROL WHITESIDE

The Central Valley Has Found Its Voice

A local advocate forms a think tank to help guide the future of the rich agricultural region beset by rapid growth and pervasive poverty.

**By Maria L. LaGanga,
Times Staff Writer**

When Carol Whiteside zipped along the stage on a Segway Human Transporter smiling like a cat, she was making a point about the future of the Central Valley.

OK, so she was also scratching off one more experience from what she calls "my life checklist" by piloting the gyroscopically balanced, computerized scooter in front of several hundred cheering people.

But in kicking off the eighth annual conference on California's mammoth agricultural heartland while perched precariously on two wheels, Whiteside was doing what she does best: prodding the region to seek out innovation as it copes with the unintended consequences of growth.

"We are always trying to tell people there are options and choices," she said. "In the valley, not only do these make sense for space reasons, but they're good for bike lanes."

Whiteside is founder and president of the Great Valley Center, a Modesto-based think

tank that specializes in a region approximately the size of England.

Stretching 450 dusty miles from Redding to Bakersfield, the Central Valley is made up of 19 counties; is home to more state prisons than any other region; perpetually suffers from high unemployment, poverty and teen pregnancy rates; and struggles with unprecedented growth and choking smog. Its population, 6.3 million today, is expected to nearly double by 2040.



A CALL TO ARMS: Carol Whiteside's labor of love is development of a comprehensive plan for California's mammoth Central Valley. (Robert Durell / LAT)

"The first thing Carol has done has been to really call serious attention to the challenges and the opportunities facing the valley," said Steve Toben, who was program officer for the environment with the William and Flora

Los Angeles Times

Hewlett Foundation when it helped fund the Great Valley Center's birth in 1997. "Carol is able to be a spokesperson for a reasoned agenda for constructive policy change."

As the oracle of the Central Valley, the 62-year-old Whiteside has explained the region's challenges and highpoints to elected officials and philanthropists, planners and journalists from coast to coast.

She has interpreted Hanford's *marquetitas*, or swap meets, to the New York Times and deciphered Fresno, the urban heart of agricultural California, for USA Today. In the Wall Street Journal, she has voiced worry about the proliferation of warehouses where crops once grew; for Associated Press, she has rued how hard her adopted home is on its youths.

And always, everywhere, to anyone who will listen, she has talked about growth and its effect on the region.

"We live in an area with America's highest poverty and America's fastest growth rate," she wrote earlier this year in an opinion piece in the Visalia Times-Delta. "We are the world's most productive agricultural region and suffer the worst air quality in the United States. We need to improve our jobs base and diversification and, at the same time, preserve our strengths and culture."

The occasion for that call to arms was a report by the Congressional Research Service, the public policy research arm of the U.S. Congress, showing that the San Joaquin Valley — the southern half of the Central Valley — gets dramatically less in federal spending per capita than the nation as a whole. At the same time, according to the report, the San Joaquin Valley has a much higher poverty rate than Appalachia.

For many, a deep love for the Central Valley comes from equally deep roots here: a childhood on a farm, a life spent tilling the fertile soil that provides 25% of the U.S. food supply or a connection with the more

than 300 crops raised in the flat fields between the Sierra Nevada and the Coast Ranges.

Not Whiteside. Born in Chicago, she didn't spend time in the valley until she attended college at UC Davis. On graduation, she left for the Bay Area. She later spent two years in Europe when her husband — now a Superior Court judge in Stanislaus County — served in the military.

They moved to Modesto 33 years ago and, this time, she stayed.

Mary E. Grogan, the former director of parks and recreation for Modesto and a longtime friend and admirer, remembers Whiteside as a young mother, teaching cooking part time in a city program and raising two sons: a deeply intelligent young woman with a killer beef marinade.

It didn't take long for Whiteside to win a seat on the school board, then the City Council. She became mayor of Modesto in 1987. When Pete Wilson was elected governor, she headed to Sacramento, where she served as assistant secretary of the California Resources Agency and later as director of intergovernmental affairs.

But life in the leafy agricultural city of Modesto, combined with her years in state and local government, made Whiteside realize that the Central Valley was a neglected region, an unappreciated resource whose future would have a great effect on the state as a whole.

"People on the coast were too busy to care about the valley," Whiteside said in a recent interview. "The rest of California drove through it en route to Yosemite and didn't care that there were 5 million people here ... who would change the future of the state."

And so the Great Valley Center was born. Whiteside recalls dragging a box of files, a card table and a Princess phone into the center's rented offices on its first day of

Los Angeles Times

operation and thinking: "Oh, my God. What have I done? Can I sublet some of this?"

The center initially focused on farmland preservation and urban sprawl, but in the ensuing years, under Whiteside's leadership, its agenda grew.

"Over time, driven partly by the foundations" that funded the center, "they were urged to get more involved in the social issues of the valley — schools, health, etc. — so they diversified," Toben says. "They got involved in transportation and Highway 99 issues and the digital network. All of those things flowed to the Great Valley Center, because they have a profile."

The Great Valley Center set up leadership training programs for local elected officials and those who wanted to run for office. It has trained thousands of the valley's poorest residents in computer skills and pushed for regional planning and renewable energy programs.

"I think our greatest success was creating an identity around the region, so not only does it think of itself differently, but others think of it differently," Whiteside said.

Today, however, the center is facing its greatest challenge: advocating for a region at a crossroads just as it is losing significant financial aid. The center's biggest donors have announced that they are changing their focus and will be reducing their support.

Whiteside started a million-dollar fundraising drive in December and has scaled back her organization's broad agenda.

With less foundation money, it no longer funnels grant allocations to other groups.

Other organizations have stepped in to teach computer literacy, so the Great Valley Center is stepping out. Whiteside's main goal now is to push for a comprehensive plan for the region's development.

"The next two, three, five years is a time when critical decisions will be made," she said. "What are we going to do about farmland, development? Do we have high-speed rail?"

"I've never wanted to do the plan," she added. "I've wanted to help the plan happen."

'Power elite'

A moderate Republican who favors abortion rights, Carol Whiteside has won every nonpartisan election in which she has competed. The only race she lost was for the California Assembly in 1989.

- Her ability to work with people of all political stripes is one of the characteristics that has made her successful as an advocate for the Central Valley. "I never see her put a slant on the stuff that comes out of the Great Valley Center," says Evelyn Tolbert, a city councilwoman from Tracy. "She takes the facts and puts them out.... That makes it applicable for every city, regardless of whether they're liberal or conservative."

- In 1999, California Journal magazine named Whiteside in a short list of "the valley's power elite"; others included Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Bakersfield) and state Treasurer Phil Angelides, a Democrat.

- Whiteside held an international design competition in 1999 called "Housing the Next 10 Million: Envisioning California's Great Central Valley." "I decry the ubiquitous mall," she says. "I have always believed the valley should have a style that says 'Central Valley' as much as Victorians say 'San Francisco' and brownstones say 'Baltimore.' We still haven't quite gotten there."

Leadership Development Programs (1998-Present)

The Great Valley Center created three regional public policy leadership programs for elected officials, teens and emerging leaders of all ethnic backgrounds to encourage collaboration, examining competing views, and crossing boundaries of all kinds.

The attached brochures describe each program.

- **Great Valley Leadership Institute:** This Leadership development program brings together 25 Central Valley city and county elected officials each year to hone ethics-based decision making skills under the guidance of faculty from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. More than 130 elected officials from 19 counties have participated. The most recent class of participants graduated in August 2005.
- **Institute for the Development of Emerging Area Leaders (IDEAL) Fellowship Program:** This 6-month leadership development is open to 20 emerging ethnically diverse rural leaders per year. Ten of the more than 120 alumni drawn from 19 counties have gone on to hold elective office.
- **Great Valley Fellows program:** A year long public policy leadership development program for college students.

Housing the Next Ten Million: An Interdisciplinary Architectural Design Competition (2001)

Demographers predict the Valley population will double to 12 million or more by 2040. Nowhere in the world are the issues of land use, urban form, economic development and conservation being played out with more urgency or such opportunity for innovation. The Great Valley Center initiated an international design competition to encourage dialogue and spark creative solutions to accommodate the region's housing needs without sacrificing important resources or the quality of life. The project was sponsored by 26 businesses, organizations and agencies from the private, nonprofit and public sectors - including 11 local governments and the American Institute of Architects, California Council.

The competition attracted 130 submissions, representing 17 countries, 26 states, and the District of Columbia. Entries proposed policy and design solutions to accommodate growth in the Central Valley, including the development of infill sites, redevelopment solutions, housing designs, plans to grow in new areas, and ideas for small rural agricultural communities.

State of the Great Central Valley Indicators Series (1998-Present)

Beginning in 1998, the Great Valley Center has published a set of user-friendly, data-intensive indicators reports on economic, social, and environmental issues to provide reliable information about the region for people working to improve the region. Each year in a five year cycle, a new report is released on one of five topics: the Economy, Environment, Community Well-Being, Health or Education.

The data in these reports, and the related online database, are used by journalists, students, elected officials and nonprofits in their day to day work.

In 2005, the seventh report in the series with an edition analyzed the environment in collaboration with expertise from the California Biodiversity Council.

One set of the indicators series has been attached.

The Valley Futures Project: Scenario Planning (2003)

In 2003, the Great Valley Center developed an ambitious package of 12 five-minute radio dramas and text narratives, 3 nine-minute films and a discussion guide depicting the Central Valley in the year 2025. The scenarios repackage statistical data on economic, social and environmental issues into a conversation-starting tool for laypeople, high school students and community groups. Media coverage, workshops, and online and recorded materials engaged residents in longer-term views of regional outcomes. More than 3.5 million media hits have been recorded.

**Our Valley, Our Choice:
Building a Livable Future for the San Joaquin Valley
(2007)**

This Great Valley Center book on urban growth in the Valley was designed as a user-friendly introduction to the environmental, social and economic issues facing the region. Using photographs, anecdotes and narratives, it attempts to translate complex policy discussions regarding sustainability, renewable energy and land use for a lay audience. Its release in 2007 coincides with a new phase of discussions that are beginning within the development and planning community to create a vision for the future for the Valley.