With Polycom® Telepresence, Fresno County Governments Improve Regional Planning While Reducing the Cost to Taxpayers

Industry

- Government

Daily use

- Staff meetings
- Project planning
- Community meetings
- Meetings with partner organizations and agencies

Solution

- County-wide Polycom telepresence network, backed by the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform, allows regional planners to engage face-to-face without costs and productivity losses from travel
- Standards-based Polycom solution allows collaboration across state and beyond
- Infrastructure shared by Fresno COG and Kings County transit authorities

Results and benefits

- Fresno COG members reduce travel by 100,000 miles annually
- Reductions in driving cuts collective carbon emissions by about 39 tons a year
- Fresno COG's initial investment in Polycom telepresence paid for itself in just eight months
- Kings Area Rural Transit can give board members, vanpool drivers, and passengers a way to attend meetings without hours of driving
- Investing to upgrade Fresno COG's Polycom® RealPresence® Platform gives Kings County access to HD telepresence network at far lower cost to taxpayers

Overview

The Council of Fresno County Governments (Fresno COG) provides a way for municipal governments in the heart of California's Central Valley to work through problems that extend beyond their own boundaries. One of 25 COGs in California, Fresno COG focuses on regional planning for transportation, housing, air quality, and other areas, that is shaped by input from citizens.

An efficient cost-sharing model also gives COG members access to centralized technical services. Since 2008, these have included a high-definition (HD) telepresence network powered by Polycom® HDX® systems and the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform, used to replace in-person meetings with virtual meetings. By greatly reducing the time, cost, and carbon emissions involved in driving to meetings, Fresno COG's Polycom deployment paid for itself in the first eight months. And in a textbook example of strategic and efficient use of taxpayer dollars, transportation authorities in nearby Kings County helped fund an upgrade of Fresno COG's infrastructure. Now agencies in both counties can access the same telepresence network at a fraction of what two separate deployments would have cost.

Bringing regional planning into the digital age

In fast-growing Fresno County, keeping problems manageable takes a village—several of them, in fact. When one community is threatened by traffic-choked roads or deteriorating air quality, it's a safe bet that neighboring towns are facing similar problems. Fresno COG exists to make sure problems are solved in ways that benefit all the areas likely to be affected. Arriving at those solutions takes plenty of planning and face-to-face collaboration.

For nearly 40 years, all of it was done over the phone and in person. "Traditionally, monthly council meetings were held in chambers, so a lot of time and money was wasted on travel," says Tom Webster, Fresno COG's former senior regional planning and IT manager who now serves the council as a consultant. "Then you'd have quarterly meetings among directors and high-level planners involving anywhere from 30 to 80 people. And blueprint planning groups have to meet more often as planning progresses, to the point where you'd have several people driving to Fresno every week. The costs—in money, in productivity lost to travel, in carbon emissions, and even in work/life balance—they all add up fast."

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Tom Webster, then-Senior Regional Planning and IT Manager, Fresno COG

Costs multiplied in the late '90s, when the focus of Municipal Planning Organizations (MPOs) like Fresno COG grew to include air quality, housing planning and more. "Working through these issues requires face-to-face planning, with visual information and presentations," he says. "Conference calls don't always get it done."

Seeing the value of Polycom

To make planning more efficient, Fresno COG solicited bids from four providers, including Sebastian, a telecommunications provider based in Fresno. "Sebastian helped us realize how Polycom provided the best bang for the buck," he says."They understood video conferencing well, and their bid was considerably lower than the others. They made it easy for us to see the value that Polycom delivered."

And since MPOs like Fresno COG are all about collaboration, they need to work with planners in Sacramento, San Francisco and beyond. "We were not interested in any way in a closed system," says Webster. "We wanted something that could allow us to communicate with government agencies throughout the nation. Only Polycom could deliver that."

And deliver it has. Fresno COG's 16 member agencies now can engage interactively while sharing images, presentations and other video content. Two Polycom® HDX® 9000 room telepresence units were installed in 2008 in council headquarters in Fresno, and another 15 HDX series systems were installed in member agency offices in a second phase. All are tied to the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform that allows Fresno COG members to connect with other COGs and state agencies.

Webster says the investment in Polycom telepresence paid for itself in just eight months. What's more, replacing in-person meetings with telepresence has reduced agency driving by 100,000 miles annually. Those savings also mean COG members collectively cut their annual carbon emissions by about 39 tons. "Polycom telepresence helps us not only protect air quality by enhancing our ability to collaborate on regional plans, but it also keeps cars off the road and carbon out of the air," says Webster.

Sebastian

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Putting people first.

Real-Time Communication and Collaboration

- 17+ Polycom® HDX® series telepresence systems serving Fresno COG members

- 10 Polycom® HDX® series telepresence systems installed throughout Kings County and the KART region

- Polycom® VVX® business media phones offering one-touch video for KART board members to participate in video calls

- Polycom® RMX® 2000 conferencing platforms installed in Fresno COG's headquarters

- Polycom® Converged Management Application™ (CMA®) 4000 Server conference management platform, and 100 licenses of CMA™ Desktop software

- Polycom® RSS™ 4000 recording and streaming servers for use in capture and playback of meetings, training and other sessions

- Polycom® Video Border Proxy™ (VBP®) firewall traversal solutions to enable face-to-face communication with parties outside Fresno COG's network

"Here are government agencies sharing resources to get the most from taxpayer dollars. Without recreating the wheel in Kings County, we're able to give KART board members, drivers and even vanpool passengers a chance to attend every meeting."

Ron Hughes, Director, Kings Area Rural Transit

Extending the reach of Telepresence

Fresno's collaborative spirit is catching. Next door in Kings County, transit authorities mulled plans to develop their own network to link operators of 420 vanpools serving farm workers in six counties across the region. "It made no sense to drive three hours to have a board meeting," recalls Ron Hughes, director of Kings Area Rural Transit (KART). Hughes consulted with Sebastian Senior Consultant Daryl Middleton, who suggested using KART's grant funding to expand Fresno COG's infrastructure with additional call management, recording and streaming capabilities. That way, the same Polycom® RealPresence® Platform could also serve video endpoints in Kings County, where mobile Polycom carts and Polycom® VVX® business media phones are bringing video capabilities to KART directors and customers.

"Here are government agencies sharing resources to get the most from taxpayer dollars," says Hughes. "Without recreating the wheel in Kings County, we're able to give KART board members, vanpool drivers and even passengers a chance to attend every meeting. None of this would have been possible without Fresno COG, Sebastian, and Polycom telepresence."

About Polycom

Polycom is the global leader in open standards-based unified communications (UC) solutions for voice and video collaboration, trusted by more than 415,000 customers around the world. Polycom solutions are powered by the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform, comprehensive software infrastructure and rich APIs that interoperate with the broadest set of communication, business, mobile and cloud applications and devices to deliver secure face-to-face video collaboration in any environment. Polycom and its ecosystem of over 7,000 partners provide truly unified communications solutions that deliver the best user experience, highest multi-vendor interoperability, and lowest TCO. Visit www.polycom.com or connect with us on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to learn how we're pushing the greatness of human collaboration forward.

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