

*Merced County General Plan Update*

# Focus Group #2 Notes

November 13 and 14, 2007

(Notes Revised January 23, 2008)



**Mintier  
& Associates**  
PLANNING CONSULTANTS

## Economic Development Focus Group (November 13, 2007)

### Issues and Opportunities

#### *Report Comments*

- Issues summary is good

#### *General Comments*

- Review existing Economic Development Strategies
  - Merced, Los Banos, Merced County, and other cities have existing strategies
  - Don't reinvent the wheel
- Focus on home-grown start-up companies
- County needs to focus on how it can retain existing businesses (e.g., Gallo)
  - County has lost thousands of jobs from employers relocating
- Address the drought issue
  - How will water supply effect future economic growth
  - Need to protect water supply
  - Encourage conservation
- Need economic policy with depth
  - What does the county want?
  - Need focused policy
  - Prioritize
    - Fresno GP – leads with economic development element
  - Focus on building blocks
    - Education – UC Merced downtown, support Merced College
    - Health care
- Create more economic opportunities
  - Look at success stories in other communities
  - Remove regulatory restrictions
    - Need flexibility to respond to the market
  - Provides incentives for development
  - Provide infrastructure
  - Identify suitable land for development
    - Need 3 or 4 parcels (+1,000 acres) with the proper zoning (e.g. South of Merced, along I-5)
      - Zoning needs to reflect market conditions
      - Let market respond to sites
- Land use & economic develop policies need to be linked
- Need to react to demographic and other changes

- Single family homes being used as multi-family (e.g., six bedroom homes)
- Impact of homeland security
- Address broader impacts
- Market analysis in Background Report is not current
  - Agricultural industry is changing dramatically
- Need incentives for positive economic growth (e.g., Mendon)
  - Biggest solar farm in state
  - Developed from a brownfield site
- Encourage growth of light industry
- County needs to be more proactive and less reactive regarding economic growth
- Encourage jobs/housing balance
- Diversify all industries
- Identify economic thresholds
- Enterprise zone
  - Tremendous potential
- Need economic development standards
- Look at green infrastructure
- Recognize economic influence of surrounding communities (Counties)
  - Identify potential impacts that could affect Merced County
- Grassland map has been revised
  - Tripled in size
  - Need to address

### **Growth/Policy Options**

- City-County coordination is required
  - Form partnership early
- New towns are not a viable option
  - Need to establish threshold for size
  - Capitol costs to build are too high
  - Services strain
    - Example Santa Nella lacks recreation
  - Costs to high – taxes
  - Wouldn't be for mixed income levels
    - Example Impacts in Los Banos
- Beneficial large-scale development in rural areas

### **Miscellaneous**

- Website – fix links – e-mail

## Public Infrastructure Focus Group (November 13, 2007)

### Issues and Opportunities

#### *Report Comments*

- Correction on Page 18 – Winton – new school in 2007
- The Issues and Opportunities Report adequately addressed all of the issues discussed in the first FG meeting

#### *General Comments*

- Special districts
  - Need to know how growth will impact each special district since most lack capacity for serving new development
- Schools
  - Building schools by incurring debt
    - Is it easy to build them by incurring debt or difficult (is this bonds that must be approved by voters?)
  - Siting schools and paying for infrastructure
    - County Office of Education has no bonding ability, so they have a problem locating new schools
  - Transportation is an issue for school districts because of the need to move students
  - Difficult to align school needs with actual growth projections.
  - School boundaries don't change when city boundaries change
    - Some districts are overlooked while others have some capacity
    - Small change in new development location may add growth to area (McSwain, Weaver, etc.) but impact could be greater in one district than another
    - Creates disjointed neighborhoods
  - Address current imbalance
    - Some schools overcrowded, some have low enrollment
      - Livingston
    - Avoid competition between school districts over students
  - Schools should be associated with the specific community
    - Support the school district that makes the most sense to serve the community
  - Financial hardships
    - Qualify to get state funding
    - Question of how much debt
  - Potential Policy: County will encourage working with local school districts on boundary changes that help to ensure the local community has a central school district and unified community feel. Avoid sending students in one town to different locales.

- Encourage joint use schools/facilities
- Biggest schools banking on more development
- Merced County Office of Education
  - Financial hardships
  - Looking for new land for schools
- Investigate alternative funding mechanisms
  - Consider privatization of roads and water and sewer districts
  - Growth should pay for itself
    - Impact fees
- Need tools to address district problems
  - Annual fee
  - Developer fee can be built in
- Grow in reasonable increments
  - Developers dictate where growth occurred
    - Shouldn't be developer driven
- Protect Castle Airport – major asset
  - Avoid development encroachment at both ends of the runway to protect employment opportunities
    - Major focus area
    - What should Board do to protect runway
      - Keep surrounding area in agricultural use
  - Consider building a bypass road/toll road to build expressway from Merced to Atwater linked to Highway 99
    - Necessary to support economic development effort and alleviate transportation bottlenecks
  - Need economic policy regarding infrastructure needed to attract new industry/employment
    - Need to focus on Castle in near term

### **Growth/Policy Options**

- City-centered growth
  - Strongly favored city-centered growth as first growth option.
  - Well-planned controlled growth
    - Only grow in manageable increments
  - Increase density
  - Encourage Infill versus sprawl
  - Promote redevelopment as opposed to sprawl
  - No county tax means less money for required infrastructure
    - Growth with services/infrastructure is a must
      - Lack of services/infrastructure severely limits economic development opportunities
  - Mixed use/balance of land uses

- Encourage pedestrian-oriented development
- Continue revenue sharing with cities
- School boundaries need to change when city boundaries change
  - No schools located in some developing areas
- Cities can grow in all directions – difficult for schools to control
- Make sure jobs are go in with housing in new growth areas
- Challenge of how to extend water and sewer service to potential school sites
- Major issues with City of Merced are traffic, roads, and railroad crossings (grade separations)
- Unincorporated Community growth
  - Need master planned facilities rather than ad hoc planning.
  - Water and sewer districts are not in a position to support growth.
  - Consider incentives to encourage growth in certain areas.
  - Direct growth to unincorporated communities that are best suited for it, maybe those who can become cities in the future
    - Provide incentives for growth
  - Discourage development in areas where the county can't handle growth and there is a lack of services
  - Discourage growth in areas where locals do not desire growth.
  - Direct growth to the west county possibly through the creation of “new towns”
  - Winton/Delhi are examples of communities that could benefit from direct growth
- Resource Constraints Growth Plan
  - Cannot continue current growth patterns without taking into consideration our resources and sustaining those resources (not just quantity, but quality) – clean air, clean drinkable water (consider the cost of cleaning water with high arsenic levels), and conserving agricultural land).
- Should County provide impediments for growth to control where it occurs?
- Need options to small special districts
  - Privatization
  - County Service Area authority for County operation of services
  - Consolidating with a larger regional service provider (e.g., a city or irrigation district)

### **Miscellaneous**

- Send out minutes/summary sooner to Focus Group members
  - Easier to remember what was discussed
- Be sure to identify dates, times, and other details on all e-mails to focus group members
- Consider using planning charrettes
- Need to improve workshop attendance

## Open Space/Habitat Focus Group (November 13, 2007)

### Issues and Opportunities

#### *Report Comments*

- Issues summary is good

#### *General Comments*

- Concerned about lack of grading ordinance (upland & wetlands)
  - Landowners/farmers do grading that often impacts wetlands or habitat
- Need riparian habitat policies
- Merced & San Joaquin Rivers
  - Policies needed to restore riparian habitat – if there was development, could get dedicated buffer –
  - Ag. Land use may be the best buffer if it is managed correctly (sediment run-off, etc.)
- Issue w/ Volta
  - Question whether Volta will be an agricultural service center
- Enterprise Zone
  - Concern that Enterprise Zones will conflict with habitat
  - Need to consider GP policies to assure that implementation of enterprise zones do not negatively impact resources.
  - Existing Enterprise Zone maps are unreadable
- Grasslands: need 1-mile buffer between adjacent uses & grasslands ecological area
  - Besides urban encroachment, some agricultural industrial uses may also be a conflict to grasslands habitat (dairies and processing plants)
- Habitat Conservation Plans
  - Look to what other counties are doing
    - San Joaquin County did HCP countywide
    - Others have done it by region.
    - East Fresno County starting
    - Kern County – example
    - Solano County
    - South Sacramento County HCP
- Use Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP) in concert with Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) process to figure out a “structure” of habitat throughout a region or the county. Not just a species-by-species approach
- Habitat set aside elsewhere to mitigate (3:1 ratio) for loss of land in developed areas. Sometimes you lose more than 3:1 in the species you try to protect.
- Conservation easements

- The Nature Conservancy has a big role in easement purchases. Needs connectivity to make it viable
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) conservation easements are really about limits to grading of land. USFWS concerned about deep ripping of rangeland
- Educate landowners that they are stewards of the plants & animals species on their land and promote conservation easements or tax breaks
- Come up with conservation easements that help habitat, not just Williamsons Act. This way, land owners will not need to convert their land for development.
- Tool mitigation bank, if located in right spot can be pretty successfully
  - Used in Butte County
- California Department of Fish & Game (CDFG) habitat sensitive areas
  - Oak woodland in Snelling area are a concern.
  - Adding septic systems is bad for habitat, but tailings are becoming valuable habitat and if they were not in tailings, there would probably be more development concern areas trace mercury when you go below grade
- In our urban plans, incorporate habitat & trails
- Constraints-based mapping
  - Map out areas to provide long-term habitat protection (CDFG/USFWS Service maps and other habitat mapping sources).
  - Do we want to create an area(s) of the county where we target conservation easements banks but don't allow urban development or ease deep ripping for tree crops?
- Develop a local model that fits the county's unique set of circumstances
- Poorly devised revenue sharing is forcing the county into the need to look outside city boundaries to grow

### **Growth/Policy Options**

- Prefer city-centered growth
  - Growth in cities at higher density stressed where can we plan where capacity exists for water & traffic? If we can't get capacity don't expand.
    - How much growth can be accommodated in various areas if we increase density & don't expand out?
- More dense around existing development (City or County)
- Problem with existing unincorporated towns are a lack of infrastructure. But for habitat, some existing urban areas too. What does County do to protect habitat?
- Set firm urban limit lines & make cities stay within it
- New towns need water & can harm habitat.
- Discourage rural residential center expansion – inefficient land use
  - Are there existing cut up parcels where A-R zoning (RRCs) is appropriate?
  - Don't allow 20 ac ranchettes
- Need to consider constraints (e.g. water)

- Agreement for mapping area in county where no growth is allowed – land is set aside for habitat but don't have unrestricted elsewhere.
- There are natural carrying capacities.
- Existing unincorporated community growth
  - Infrastructure problem
- Habitat values are inside of cities also
- Adopt a grading ordinance
- Development capacity should frame growth

## **Water Focus Group (November 13, 2007)**

### **Issues and Opportunities**

#### ***General Comments***

- Need countywide water study
  - Do not have a clear understanding of how much water is available
  - How can we plan for growth any place without knowing how much water we have?
  - Consider growth caps
- Need more education of water managers re: water supply options (e.g. dams) MCAG
- LAFCO Municipal Service Review reporting process helps provide handle on status of water supply.
- 8 water districts, 3 types of providers: Municipal districts/Private companies/ irrigation districts.
  - Problem with some districts inability to provide adequate information
- Hilmar Water Dist.
  - Water supply is OK but quality (arsenic) is a major problem (Magnesium also a problem)
- Need to give greater emphasis on water supply in Issues and Opportunities Report
- Consider preparing separate water and air quality elements
- Need to address water as a part of natural resources
- Merced Water Supply Plan is inadequate as well as the current system of smaller entities reporting back, especially in very small unincorporated communities.
- Merced ground water study just started won't be done until after GPU
- You can't separate supply from quality issues
- Problem w/ conversion of ag water districts to urban districts
- Need to have sustainable growth in county
- Are there community values that support a better balance?
- Post SB 610/AB 221 on website post example of 610 study

#### **Growth/Policy Options**

- Strong support for resource constraints based alternative
- Policy suggestion: make water supply for ag superior to urban uses

- Capacity should frame growth within the county

### **Public Comments**

- Need to plan for growth/not just limited resources

### **Miscellaneous**

- Put together/distribute summary of focus group comments and distribute for review to group members

## **Agricultural Focus Group (November 14, 2007)**

### **Issues and Opportunities**

#### ***Report Comments***

- None identified

#### ***General Comments***

- Water Issues
  - Strong need for a countywide water study – east and west sides
  - “East Merced Water Supply not fully implemented” – Doesn’t agree
    - Doesn’t have a plan
    - Need studies for carrying capacity of both surface and underground supplies
  - Look at long-term surface water and groundwater supply for agriculture
  - Need regional cooperation regarding water supply
  - Drainage (storm water and irrigation)/water run-off
    - Hillmar cheese
    - Need a flood control district/agencies
  - Overpumping Groundwater
    - Reducing quality
    - Salt build up
    - Farm practices are not sustainable
  - West side federal ag water
    - Planned for urban uses
      - Need to consider water impacts based on the Tracy Pumps lawsuit
    - San Joaquin River
      - Storm Drainage impacts
      - San Joaquin River Settlement
    - Need a descriptive mitigation policy for water
- Parcelization

- Limit the number of homes
- Existing policies are too weak
- Need to verify employees – (W2, employ verification)
  - Don't have staff to enforce
- 40 acres & 160 acres should be the limit
- Look at maps of parcels
  - create subcommittee to review
    - Create forum during the winter
    - Look at land-locked parcels
    - A-1 to AR of existing small parcels
- Prime ag land definition needs to change
- Emphasize small farms
  - ex. Harmony Communities
  - Look at as an economic unit
- Strengthen right-to-farm
- Need farmland mitigation measures with “teeth”
  - Need maps and information on existing conservation easements in Merced County – agricultural, grazing, and habitat. Merced County already has required mitigation on projects. Develop a list of projects and their requirements
  - Ex. Stockton – acre for acre mitigation – conservation easements
  - Stanislaus County – mitigation ordinance
  - Survey of RFP – Ag Issues Center – U.C. Davis
- Encourage fresh foods
  - Provide Policy examples
- Need food security policies

### **Growth/Policy Options**

- Incorporated city-centered growth is most desirable option
  - Need to strengthen tax sharing agreement
  - Encourage intensive growth
    - High density up & infill
  - Strong language needed regarding City/County coordination
- New towns
  - Problem: too many unknowns

### **Miscellaneous**

- Have minutes checked before published
- Consider holding each Focus Group at a different time to allow people to attend multiple meetings
- Coordinate focus group comments
  - Ex. Ag and water

## Circulation Focus Group (November 14, 2007)

### Issues and Opportunities

#### *Report Comments*

- Pg 23: what is meaning of comment below UC Merced Airport comment regarding smoke stack restrictions
- Pg 26: many bullets have no meaning – can't tell what point is pro/con of issue
- Pg 29 – Castle – supposed to be a regional transportation hub for airport – cargo – (ref revise plan text) protect from encroachment – including City of Merced GP update – maybe 10-20,000 homes. Brookfield project possible encroachment – housing & industry. Has to protect jobs & econ potential – mentioned ALUC plan
- Pg 30: Coordination w/regional plans – especially Blueprint – intermodal plan didn't include Castle
- Pg 32: High speed rail – ref. to Castle as benefiting from it – some talk of maintenance center – like rail yard. Scott said not real face to face discussion has occurred just a lot of rumors
- P.32 re: High speed rail... if stop at castle is planned, it better be reserved soon... build out is coming fast. Development is going to happen quickly.
- Issues & Opportunities Report does not address new roads proposed such as campus parking & at. /Merced parking – need for Castle to thrive – but not as close as western route MCAg is looking at.
- Missing discussion of bike comments between cities (non-recreational)

#### *General Discussion*

- Roads divide habitat
  - Need to provide wildlife corridors/ connectors when roads/interchange are constructed.
- Need better dialog between cities and counties over road fees & improvements as well as other services & protection of airport.
  - Group acknowledged that city growth affects county
- Beltway needs to be boundary not facilitate urban expansion beyond belt way
- Need to look at how county can reduce traffic demand.
- Look for opportunities with alternative fuels (e.g. bio diesel)
- Need design that reduces travel requirements
- Castle Airport
  - Castle is supposed to be a regional transportation hub
  - Need protection for airport operations concern over City of Merced encroachment.
    - City of Merced potentially expanding into over flight patterns of Castle w/ development approvals

- Intergovernmental coordination – Castle left of goods movement report inducement
- No communication between Castle & High speed rail authority
- Brookfield (big project in city of Merced GPU) looking at ag circulation & protection of Castle airspace. They are using village plans meeting city requirements – ¼ mile distance max between housing & commercial sites – desired.
- Discuss conflicts w/Castle as result of city GPs at Joint BOS/PC Study Session
- Maps don't show Atwater/Merced expressway.
- Need to address Merced ring road proposal
- Concern about leapfrog development happening in cities & impact an circulation system
- Need to build to maximize use of existing infrastructure
- Not much opportunity for:
  - Rail maintenance facility
  - Rail to air transfer
- How does enterprise zone interfere with circulation?
- Promote alternative modes of transportation
  - Walkable communities/village concept
  - More bikeways & routes are needed
    - Need separated ROWs
  - Trails
  - Transit
- Intergovernmental coordination for Blueprint project has been weak
- Choices at industrial land location may be truck generators. More VMTs?
- Air quality is a key issue for the circulation focus group
  - Role of trucks
- Ring roads can be used as boundary

### **Growth Options**

- The County needs to plan roadways & improvements to accommodate city growth if the County directed all growth at the cities

### **Miscellaneous**

- Need to get copies of Blueprint background report