



SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

Livable Places NEWS

Linking land use, transportation, clean air, and community participation to make livable communities

Valley Cities Take Major Steps Toward Improving Livability

Between November 1994 and March 1996, sixteen cities in the San Joaquin Valley held public workshops to take a hard look at their communities. Attended by local leaders, city staff, the business community, and residents, these events were organized by the Local Government Commission and funded by the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District.

Workshop participants enjoyed an evening of educational presentations and participation in a community image survey. Then, led by the inspiring and enthusiastic urban designer, Michael Freedman, residents of each community brainstormed both the things they liked best about where they lived, their city's greatest assets—and then listed the negatives. Instructed to dream without real-life constraints, participants were asked to envision what they would like their communities to be like in the future. Finally, they brainstormed realistic steps that could be taken immediately to begin to implement their hopes for the future.

What has happened since these workshops? A survey of officials from the sixteen participating communities revealed results that are quite astounding. These communities, located throughout the Valley, have moved into action and are making major strides toward realizing the visions they set forth. They are becoming less centered around the automobile. They are becoming more people-friendly, more transit accessible, and more walkable. They are strengthening their downtowns. They are bringing back their own unique sense of place.

Revitalizing Downtowns

Stockton, Bakersfield, Delano, Escalon, Fresno, Selma, Newman, Merced, Tracy, Turlock, Fowler, Oakdale, Patterson, Visalia, and Shafter are all working on reestablishing their downtowns as the center of their communities.

Seeing that the waterfront could be a major asset to their downtown area, Stockton is focusing on a Waterfront Revival Plan and tying that project to the downtown to encourage walking between the two areas. The private sector has been asked to take a lead in area revitalization efforts and has responded positively, forming what they have called the "Downtown Alliance." That group has hired their first executive director and is now ready to begin work in earnest. Among their future efforts will be developing housing on the fringe of the downtown and providing evening and weekend activities to maintain a 24-hour presence in the area.



Downtown Merced

The City of Tracy has created an assessment district in their downtown to raise funds for downtown revitalization, including the installation of historic street lights. A Downtown Task Force is developing incentives to encourage new projects and private investment; they have several new projects going in as a result of their efforts. To date, vacancies in the downtown have dropped from 20% to 12%

Several cities have purchased historic or important properties to assure that they will remain community centerpieces. Newman purchased and successfully rehabilitated a downtown theater, turning it into a performing arts center. Oakdale has purchased their landmark "clock tower building" and Mayor Pat Kuhn is considering turning it into an incubator for fledgling local businesses. Stockton is beginning to purchase key downtown properties through their redevelopment agency.

A very important downtown revitalization strategy is "putting your money where your mouth is." The City of Turlock is doing this, moving City Hall back downtown.

Another important strategy is improving walkability and the look of the downtown through beautification, facade improvements and traffic calming. The Cities of Newman, Selma, Delano and Fresno have adopted facade improvement programs. The City of Fowler tore up their downtown Main Street to narrow the street, widen sidewalks, and improve pedestrian amenities. Oakdale has plans to do the same.

In Escalon, officials are working on calming traffic on the state highway which runs through their downtown. Two new stop lights will make it possible for shoppers to be able to safely get across the street.

Big-box development has been viewed as the enemy of Main Street because it draws shoppers to facilities located away from downtown. Turlock took the unusual step of turning down a proposed Target Store to be located outside the downtown area. Escalon took a broader approach, limiting the size of all retail establishments in the City to 20,000 square feet.

PROJECTS. Directing New Development.



In their new general plan, the City of Oakdale specified where new development should go, then specified that developers prepare a specific plan for these areas before their developments may be approved. A specific plan for one, 100-acre infill site has already been submitted by a developer. Called the Burchell Hill specific plan, it provides a system of trails and walkable, narrow streets which connect to two nearby shopping centers, restaurants and two parks.

PLANS. Rewriting Plans and Ordinances.



To make certain that planning documents achieve the kind of development that the community really wants, a number of planning departments are rewriting plans and ordinances. Fresno, Merced and Selma are actively involving citizens in updating their general plans. Fresno's plan establishes a Central Business District, and adds the "pedestrian-pocket" concept, which calls for higher densities and mixed uses along transit corridors. Merced's plan establishes a "village concept" for newer growth areas.

Oakdale has rewritten their general plan to include the "Oakdale Principles" based on the Ahwahnee Principles for livable communities. Specific plans for new development must comply with the "Oakdale Principles."

Citizens and city leaders in the City of Newman have been busy envisioning their desired future, then putting it on paper. They have adopted a downtown plan, a downtown plaza plan and neighborhood plans. The City of Delano has also developed a downtown plan. The City of Tracy is working on a downtown incentive ordinance.

Once the plan is developed, it is important to implement it through zoning ordinances and design guidelines. Stockton is revising its downtown zoning ordinances. Newman has developed zoning incentives for downtown-compatible uses and a Historic Preservation Ordinance. Turlock has developed new zoning ordinances that incorporate livable community concepts such as reduced setbacks and standards for planting strips. They are also developing new residential, commercial and industrial design guidelines. In Tracy, they have moved from a policy statement to a policy document to guide development in their downtown.



Downtown Newman

Changing Fee Structures

Fresno has reduced fees for projects within their inner city. The program cuts processing fees by a minimum of 50%. This has resulted in the development of 250 projects in three years in an area where only two to three projects had been built prior to that time.

Last spring, the Local Government Commission conducted a one-day follow-up conference for the sixteen cities that participated in the workshop series. At the gathering, it became clear that these communities were all facing similar challenges as they worked to make their communities more livable.

Cities and planning departments are too often in a reactive mode, working to implement piecemeal projects rather than focusing on achieving an overall vision.

Besides the common complaint of “no money,” many cities were also concerned about sales tax leakage to surrounding communities and high downtown vacancy rates. Many Valley downtowns face problems with absentee owners, deteriorating infrastructure, and low rents and sales in downtown.

All the cities felt that a coherent vision was crucial to their future success. With a strong vision shared by community leaders, and with the momentum they have already established, they will undoubtedly continue to make progress toward implementing their goals. The Local Government Commission is committed to helping by providing ideas, technical assistance, and networking.

PLACES. Bringing Back Older Neighborhoods.



Merced has created a Gateway Redevelopment Area to revive deteriorating neighborhoods in South Merced. Redevelopment funds will be used to undertake strong, long-term housing rehabilitation efforts in the area. This follows the City's earlier efforts to work on the rehabilitation of housing immediately surrounding their downtown, an activity viewed by city leaders as critical to downtown revitalization because a downtown must be surrounded by healthy neighborhoods to be economically vital.

The Tower District, featured in the summer *Livable Places News*, continues to be a focus of highly successful neighborhood redevelopment efforts in Fresno. The City of Bakersfield brought in Cal Poly San Luis Obispo landscape architecture students to beautify Southeast Bakersfield. This neighborhood, as well as the downtown, are stated priorities for the Future Bakersfield group, an organization founded by the Mayor in 1994.

In Turlock, a Livable Communities Task Force is looking for ways that schools and the City can implement solutions to problems that meet the needs of both.