



Livable Places NEWS

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

Diverse Fresno Coalition Takes the Lead in Calling for More Livable Communities

On April 14th, a unique coalition representing agriculture, conservation, business, and development interests held a groundbreaking press conference in Fresno. They gathered to call upon elected officials and other decision makers to adopt a new pattern of community growth for Fresno—a growth pattern which would protect the San Joaquin Valley's threatened farmland while creating more livable communities.

The Growth Alternatives Alliance, which includes the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, Budding Industry Association of the San Joaquin Valley, American Farmland Trust, Fresno County Farm Bureau, and the Fresno Business Council came together a year ago in response to the lack of a coherent development policy in their County.

A 1995 study by the American Farmland Trust found that, if Fresno County's expected population increase was accommodated under the current low-density growth pattern, the county was due to lose about 19 percent of its irrigated farmland and \$698 million annually in agriculture-related revenues by 2040. This loss would threaten the economic and social health of the entire community. The Alliance concluded that sprawling development created a "dangerous situation."

The Chamber of Commerce also realized that, as long as Fresno's downtown was in decay, the region would continue to lose businesses and be unable to attract new ones. "No one wants to locate where there are only strip malls and housing tracks," said Chamber President Anne Speake.

Recognizing the mutual interest of their organizations and the citizens of Fresno in encouraging economic growth, while preserving the county's agricultural base, the coalition carried out a yearlong process to define a common vision for Fresno's future. This effort was carried further, as the participants moved on to identify local government policies, which would lead to their desired future. The vision they support calls for reducing the loss of agricultural land to new development by making better use of already-developed areas for new housing. It calls for the revitalization of downtown Fresno and its older neighborhoods. And it calls for rail and other regional transit systems as a transportation alternative.

In the Alliance's new report, *A Landscape of Choice*, they recommend the following policies to provide a road map for achieving a vision of Fresno's future:

- Increases in density and a diversity of housing types in the same neighborhood
- Reduced parking requirements and the use of shared parking among several facilities
- Transit and pedestrian-oriented design guidelines
- Revised street standards to make streets narrower and more pedestrian-friendly
- Neighborhood revitalization through a process of citizen participation, permit streamlining, and public/private partnerships
- Mixed use districts encouraging residential, commercial and office uses on the same site
- Neighborhood centers and downtowns that offer a full range of services
- School sites that are used for multiple purposes
- Reasonable urban growth boundaries.
- Multi-jurisdictional coordination of land use planning

The next step for this effort is a grassroots civic-education program to build consensus throughout the entire community. Their campaign will culminate during "Build a Better Community Week," September 21-30, when the alliance will call for the unanimous acceptance and endorsement of its report by all appropriate legislative bodies with land use authority in Fresno County and its cities.

A technical advisory committee is currently working on specific development standards to implement the policy recommendations. *A Landscape of Choice* is available for \$10 from the American Farmland Trust, at (208) 627-3708.

According to the Alliance, a quote by James Howard Kunstler inspired their work: "A community is an economy: the two are one and the same ... a web of practical interrelationships between neighbors who understand their mutual dependency and honor it by competently caring for their work, their town, their offspring, and each other." The Fresno alliance is giving these words new meaning by translating talk into action.

PROJECTS. Principles Lay Out Oakdale Vision of Future.



Led by their Mayor Pat Kuhn, the City of Oakdale is proactively planning for the future of their community, making it what they want it to be. Mayor Kuhn kicked off this effort several years ago by helping citizens visualize the choices they faced. At small meetings of community organizations, she administered the community image survey [see *Livable Places News* Summer 1997 issue] to Oakdale residents.

This tool provided a way to gather input from citizens about what they wanted from their general plan without resorting to traditional, uninspired hearings on zoning and density issues.

The small-group meetings culminated in a town meeting where consensus was achieved about where the community should head in the future. This direction was articulated in the community's own version of the Ahwahnee Principles. Titled the *Oakdale Principles*, this vision calls for a compact, walkable city with a revitalized town center. The Principles are now part of the Oakdale General Plan.

To make sure that new growth will create a more compact city, the General Plan designates nine areas of town for new development. Prior to project approval, any development must present a specific area plan that addresses the *Oakdale Principles*.

One such plan — Burchell Hill — has already been designed, approved, and is on the verge of construction. Burchell Hill is planned as a residential neighborhood with a variety of lot sizes and housing types, accommodating 350 housing units on 85 acres. A five-acre central green integrates the development with the surrounding neighborhood. A natural, creek-like drainage system runs through the area, which is landscaped with natural vegetation and drought-tolerant plants.

Its narrow, tree-lined streets, and a grid of roads and/or trails through open-ended cul-de-sacs, connect the neighborhood to an elementary school, two shopping centers, restaurants, two parks, and the Stanislaus River — all located within a 1/4-mile walking distance of the planning area.

Oakdale is also working on reviving their historic downtown center. Plans have been drawn up and are being carried out to revitalize "Main Street" and the area around the Hershey chocolate factory. The City was gifted an historic clock tower building, designated the most significant historic City building. They also have an ongoing downtown facade improvement program.

Thanks to the efforts of the elected officials, staff, and citizens of Oakdale, the city with the "chocolate center" has a delightful future ahead.

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PLANS. Escalon Ordinance Limits Big-Box Development.



One of the images rated as highly negative by the citizens of the San Joaquin Valley in the LGC's Valley Community Image Survey is that of a big box retail center surrounded by a huge parking lot. These retail sales centers are big and getting bigger, ranging from 90,000 square feet-twice the size of a football field-to 250,000 square feet! Their parking lots are sometimes as big as ten or more football fields.

The City of Escalon took a bold approach to keeping out big-box stores that are inconsistent with their vision of the future by enacting an ordinance, which limits commercial development to 20,000 square feet. "Escalon's decision may be economically sound as well. Investors are warning that too many power centers have already been built," said J.D. Hightower, Escalon's city planner. Indeed, *Emerging Trends* (from Equitable Real Estate Research Corporation) estimates that 15-20% of these power centers is expected to be out of business by the year 2000

PLACES. Bakersfield Groups Target Local Growth Issues.



Driving through Bakersfield you notice the outward signs of change. The City made a commitment to the community's health and its downtown by sprucing up its main street. The County School District moved their offices downtown and then, nearby, built a very successful elementary school on underutilized land. The renovated historic Fox Theater brings a variety of entertainment into downtown, and with it, the bustle of people during the evening.

However, there is more happening in Bakersfield than just physical changes. Several groups are supporting a wide range of measure from downtown revitalization to preserving agricultural lands and promoting smart growth. Their goal is the same: to ensure a high quality of life for all residents.

The Chamber of Commerce, which represents about 1,500 businesses, is dedicated to looking at how growth issues affect businesses. They are taking a leadership role in promoting an overall vision and a comprehensive community plan for the city.

The Downtown Business Council adopted the *Bakersfield Principles*, which were in part inspired by the LGC's *Ahwahnee Principles*, as guidelines to revitalize Downtown and promote livable community ideas.

Grassroots citizens groups are also involved. The Smart Growth Coalition is a collaboration between businesses, agricultural interests, and interested citizens formed to encourage growth that preserves the economic vitality of agriculture and the community's overall economic health. The League of Women Voters has also adopted the issue of growth and Bakersfield's livability as one of its main issues.

The local newspaper, *The Bakersfield Californian*, responded to all this public interest in growth and the area's future by taking on a yearlong project to examine these issues.

On November 6th, the Kern Transportation Foundation will hold its fourth annual Livable Communities Forum. The focus of Forum '98 will be how groups can work together to create a vision and a plan that will help Bakersfield grow smart into the future.