

BLUEPRINT GROUP: No new cities in Fresno County

As officials debate growth, most agree new cities on I-5, 168 would drain resources

Michael Sullivan — Staff Writer

After two years of hammering out details and a lot of fanfare, five plans that would serve as a guide for Fresno County growth through 2050 are almost ready for public scrutiny.

But first, the Fresno County Council of Governments has hired an advertising firm to summarize the Blueprint for Growth so that the public can understand the options. On March 27 citizens then will be allowed to help decide which plan for growth — one that conserves farmland, others that save drive times — is best for the county.

Planners, elected officials, farmers and developers who make up the Blueprint Roundtable met in Fresno County last week to raise issues that each plan might address as they refined the options.

“What about the high unemployment issues on the west side?” said Steve Geil, CEO of the Fresno County Economic Development Corporation during discussions on the option that would allow industrial growth along the relatively pristine I-5 corridor.

When the concepts of creating new cities along Highway 168 and I-5 came up, many in attendance worried that they would divert resources from facilities and infrastructure already in place.

“What about the existing hubs, and doing development in urban hubs and other smaller cities?” said Richard Fosse of the I-5 Business Development Corridor, Inc.

Most members of the committee felt that it would be counterproductive to allow for the development of new cities because of the farmland the development would consume and the tax dollars that would be diverted from other infrastructure projects. Money should be put into building up existing communities, most agreed. The new towns might also attract new job growth rather than focus it in already established towns where the workforce lives and commute impacts would be reduced.

Each plan assumes that the county will be home to 1.9 million people by 2050 and offers choices for housing them, but those choices come with consequences:

Plan 1 allows the county's 15 cities to develop on the same track they are on now with development in their spheres of influence — that is land that is not incorporated, but still in the city's general plan for future construction. The plan also allows each city to expand the spheres. The plan is least favorable to agriculture — more than 31,596 acres of farmland would be paved along with 98,544 more urban acres. The average density would be 10.3 people per acre.

Plan 2 freezes the spheres at their current sizes, which means that cities can grow only by reducing lot sizes and increasing densities. It also assumes that Millerton

New Town, a city proposed near Friant Dam that is in the general plan, will resolve its federal water issues and become a reality. Plan 2 preserves the most farmland — only 2,310 acres would be paved over — and uses 48,570 urban acres, the least of any of the five proposals. There would be 20.8 people per acre, however.

Plan 3 is a hybrid of the two because limited sphere expansion would take place, but development would also occur in the unincorporated county. With an average density of 14 people per acre, development under Plan 3 would gobble 15,922 acres of farmland and 72,267 urban acres. While car travel will be unavoidable under each plan, Plan 3 estimates that households will drive the least — an average of 70.78 miles a day, compared with 73.69 if the county adopts Plan 1.

Plan 4 would allow for industrial growth along the Interstate 5 corridor, home to almond groves and a gas-fast-food complex at Panoche Road. Some sphere expansion would be allowed. Under the plan, 7,949 acres of farmland would be consumed and 77,811 acres of urban land. The average density of new development would be 13 people per acre. Plan 4 predicts the most driving at 74.86 miles per household per day.

Plan 5 is also known as the Metro Rural Loop, an idea for a looping roadway along the foothills and county interior that has come out of the City of Fresno's planning department. It sets aside swaths of farmland while addressing future transportation needs, but the implications have not been fully explored.

The marketing firm Jeffrey Scott Advertising of Fresno is in charge of explaining the plans clearly so that citizens can understand the implications of each and give feedback.

The Blueprint project is part of an eight-county process to manage growth across the Central Valley in ways that create the best possible communities by promoting redevelopment in the city centers, reducing traffic and emissions and conserving agland. Each county's Council of Governments will weigh input and select the best plan to present in December at a conference at the Great Valley Center in Modesto, a nonprofit group that guides collaboration on projects that impact the region.

Planners at the Great Valley Center will then combine the eight planning options submitted by each county into a planning “blueprint” for the Central Valley. Each county planning department and the planning departments within the cities will use the “blueprint” as a guide for implementing zoning ordinances and directing development.

While each of the plans studied by the Fresno COG last Friday has its intriguing points, participants latched onto aspects they did not like, such as a new city on the I-5 corridor in Plan 4. They believed an industrial development along the transportation route would be more appropriate.

Plan 1, which gobbles up the most land, would also create a megalopolis along Highway 99, where cities would run together without farmland greenbelts to differentiate them. While the plan was un-

PRELIMINARY DRAFT SCENARIO COMPARISONS

Inputs and Outputs	Scenario 1 Status Quo	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5 Metro Rural Loop
INPUTS					
GROWTH AREAS	Countywide	Within the current Spheres, Millerton New Town	Metro area 80%, Remaining county 20%	Countywide, Industrial growth on Interstate 5	Countywide, parameters in model
SPHERE DEVELOPMENT	Sphere expansion allowed Some expansion occurs	No sphere expansion allowed	Sphere expansion allowed Some expansion occurs	Sphere expansion allowed Some expansion occurs	Sphere expansion allowed
POPULATION (SAME FOR ALL SCENARIOS)	1,928,400	1,928,400	1,928,400	1,928,400	1,928,400
EMPLOYMENT (SAME FOR ALL SCENARIOS)	758,400	758,400	758,400	758,400	758,400
DENSITY	Same as now	Much higher density 50% reduction in lot sizes	Moderately increased density 25% reduction in lot sizes	Small increase in density 10% reduction in lot sizes	As per model
REDEVELOPMENT	250 units per year	3,000 units per year	1,500 units per year	500 units per year	As per model
AGRICULTURAL LAND PROTECTION	Same as now	Protected	Some protection	Some protection	Protected
ENVIRONMENTAL LAND PROTECTION	Same as now	Protected	Some protection	Some protection	Protected
OUTPUTS/PERFORMANCE MEASURES					
ACRES OF LAND CONSUMED					
URBANIZED AREA	98,544	48,570	72,267	77,811	54,785
STRATEGIC FARMLAND	31,596	2,310	15,922	7,949	To be determined
RESOURCE CONSERVATION LAND	4,304	13	1,765	1,812	To be determined
AVERAGE DENSITY OF NEW DEVELOPMENT (PERSONS PER ACRE)	10.3	20.8	14.0	13.0	18.5
WITHOUT ENHANCED TRANSIT NETWORK:					
VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED (VMT)	46,377,638	45,417,378	44,545,224	47,118,357	To be determined
VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED (VMT) PER HOUSEHOLD PER DAY	73.69	72.16	70.78	74.86	To be determined
TONS PER DAY OF ON-ROAD MOBILE EXHAUST					
ROG AND NOX (OZONE PRECURSORS)	28.58	27.86	27.31	28.55	To be determined
CO	80.43	59.60	58.31	60.83	To be determined
CO2	30.35	30.17	29.44	30.59	To be determined
PM2.5	1.69	1.69	1.65	1.71	To be determined

Fresno County Council of Governments

touched, officials expressed hope that the small towns would not lose their identities if the plan is chosen.

The Metro Rural Loop is different than the other four plans because it's not just a planning process, it is a road plan. The Loop, which would be built out by 2110, will be a “super highway” that caters to light- and high-speed rail, bus rapid transit and multiple traffic lanes to bypass the city of Fresno while connecting the smaller cities of Madera, Kings, Fresno and Tulare counties. The Fresno County COG has participated very little in the planning process of the Loop.

Meeting participants were concerned that the road would open up rural areas to development along its path rather than focusing it in urban areas where it already occurs.

Michael Sullivan | The reporter can be reached at 490-3466 or e-mail michaels@thebusinessjournal.com

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