

Opinion

THE FRESNO BEE
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OUR VIEW

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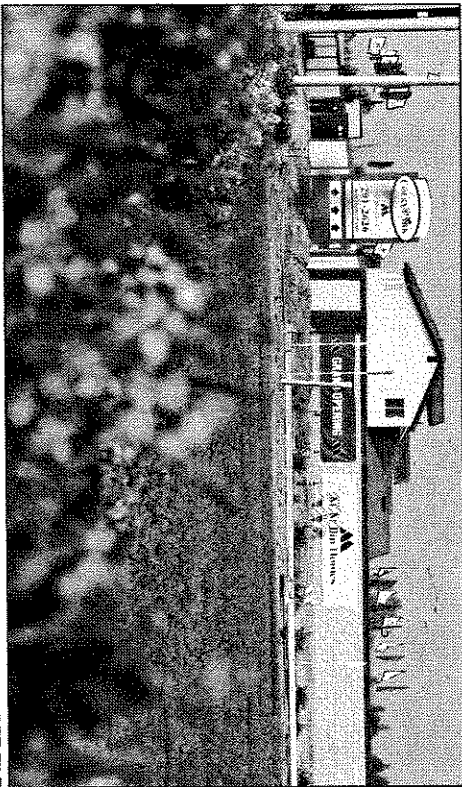
Good planning crucial to Valley's future quality of life

Public must be a part of the discussion and process of deciding direction.

The Valley is at a crossroads, buffeted on the one hand by growing population and on the other by the need to conserve precious resources such as water, air and farm land. How we balance these competing forces will have much to say about the quality of life in the Valley for our children and grandchildren — and whether any of them will want to live here at all.

The key is planning — and sticking to plans once they're adopted — and that's why we find the state-funded San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Planning Process such a good idea.

The professional planners among us know what the Valley will look like if we don't start making some changes in the patterns of growth and development that have dominated the landscape for decades. We'll have wall-to-wall cities clustered on both sides of Highway 99, and the Valley's vaunted agriculture will be a shell of its former self, with thousands of acres of once-productive land buried forever under houses, shopping malls and asphalt roads.



BEE FILE

The air will be even dirtier and water will be scarce.

That's what we'll bequeath to future generations if we continue with business as usual.

But how to yank the Valley in a new direction will be one of the thorniest public policy debates facing local governments in the coming years. The voices talking about change are growing in number and volume, but there is a tremendous inertia in the status quo — not to mention considerable profits. Change won't come easy.

Part of the reason for that is the fact that the "American Dream," fos-

tered in the heady years following victory in World War II, is still so compelling. The picture of a home in the clean and sparkling suburbs, away from the dirt and grime of the cities, still animates the American vision.

But in too many cases, what happened is that we took the dirt and grime of the cities with us when we moved outward. We built enormous networks of roads and highways to speed us from work to home to recreation to shopping — and then congested them with so many vehicles that our air became the foulest in the nation. We brag to the world about the bounty of this fertile Valley, and then pave it over as fast as we can.

And some of the earlier suburbs have succumbed to the same decay and blight that people once sought to escape. We have let many of them fester and rot as we move ever outward to new residential pastures.

There are answers. Some of them have worked elsewhere, some will be unique to the Valley. None will be an easy sell.

Halting the spread of sprawling suburbs is a good start. Directing more development inward — and up instead of out — is one step several Valley cities, including Fresno, have already taken as part of their planning processes. That should be accelerated. There are many who say that Americans, especially Californians, are so wedded to their suburbs and their cars that they'll never live in denser urban neighborhoods. But we continue to believe that there is already considerable pent-up demand for just such neighborhoods, in Fresno and elsewhere.

Nor is it necessary for everyone to leave the suburbs and move to the inner cities. Downtown Fresno, for instance, could be successfully revitalized if a mere fraction of the half-million people who now live in the city moved downtown.

We are likely to always have suburbs, but they'll have to be a different sort than we are used to. Some communities have already adopted plans that call for "clusters" or "villages" — denser arrangements of housing adjacent to jobs and commercial spaces, with open areas surrounding them. That's another useful answer.

Yet another may lie in the proposed Metro Rural Loop, which would link population centers in Fresno and Madera counties with a combination of highways, rail and transit lines, preserving the identities of existing cities and towns while tying them together in a regional framework.

Other answers will emerge as the process continues. The Blueprint planners will be seeking public input in the months ahead; we'll be talking more about that as it approaches. It's important that this become a widespread public debate, not just an academic exercise between experts.

All of us have to live with the decisions that are made in our names. All of us must be part of that process. Otherwise, we're liable to wake up one day and wonder, "When did this Valley become so bleak and dreary?" And know that by then, it will be too late to do anything about it.

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