

Project Highlight

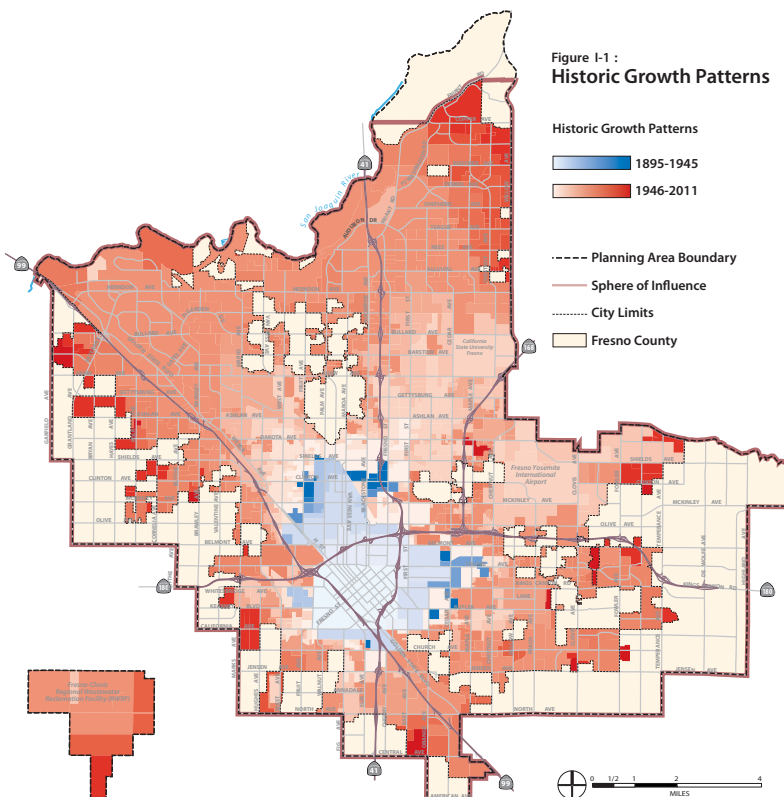


Fresno General Plan Update

Originally three square miles and home to 4,000 residents, the City of Fresno was incorporated in 1885, having grown around a railroad stop in the Central Valley. After WWII, however, a soaring population and increasingly universal access to cars radically changed the pace and character of Fresno's growth.

As part of its highway expansion program, the California Department of Highways connected Routes 99, 41, and 180 in a loop around downtown, redirecting traffic around the city's core rather than through it. The highways facilitated the movement of a growing population onto inexpensive land north and east of the once vibrant downtown, which now housed decreasing numbers of residents and businesses. Low-density suburbs, in which many residents did not have easy access to public facilities or transportation, became the norm.

With a population of 520,000, Fresno is now California's fifth largest city. It includes a significant Latino population, a long-established African American community, and one of the nation's largest groups of Hmong, Cambodian, and Lao refugees. It sits at the heart of a vibrant agricultural region and is one of the initial stations planned for California's High-Speed Rail system.



Fresno's economy, however, is under pressure. In 2010, median household incomes were 35% below state average and the unemployment rate of 16.9% was well above state average. More families were living below the poverty line. The city was also quickly depleting its groundwater and struggling with water and air quality issues. With the city on the verge of bankruptcy, the Mayor declared a fiscal emergency. City officials and the Mayor agreed: the General Plan Update, originally conceived before the recession hit, needed to signal a game change—and even more importantly, to operationalize it.

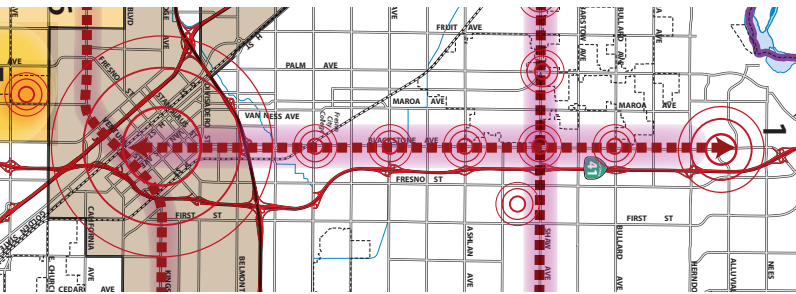
The Project

The fiscal emergency prompted the City to adopt a creative non-profit style funding model for the General Plan Update: it applied for the first round of Strategic Growth Council funding, claimed a cut of incoming federal Energy Efficiency and

Source: City of Fresno Development and Resource Management Department, 2010.

Conservation Block Grants (part of the 2009 stimulus funding), and then requested grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the California Energy Commission. In total, the team brought in nearly \$8 million in grant funds, largely by leveraging the initial Strategic Growth Council money. This move saved 30 jobs on the planning staff and enabled the City to hire a consulting team.

The *Fresno General Plan* purposefully links its citizens' quality of life and economic stability to its decisions about land use. It lays out policies and implementation strategies through 2035 and focuses on revitalizing Downtown Fresno as the city's center. Smaller "activity centers" will be built along the city's central transportation corridors, where movement will be facilitated by a bus-rapid transit system. Each of these activity centers, as well smaller infill zones throughout the city, will strive to become a Complete Neighborhood, which the City envisions as a neighborhood with as many services as possible within walking distance. Creating walkable neighborhoods—all connected via public transit—will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality.



Conceptual Urban Form Diagram: transportation lines run out from the primary center in Downtown Fresno to smaller activity centers, beginning along Blackstone Ave. Source: City of Fresno

Additionally, the Plan fosters the expansion of the export-oriented industry sectors—particularly those that leverage the region's strengths in agriculture and food—via appropriate zoning and streamlined permit approval. The Plan reserves 3,625 acres of vacant land in six clusters within the planning area where the City will expand infrastructure and utilities needed for industrial development.

Rather than expand the city's sphere of influence, its anticipated boundaries as it grows, the Plan maintains Fresno's current boundaries, planning for 51% of new units to be developed as infill on vacant or underutilized lots and the remaining 49% in growth areas along its edges. Intensive land use and mixed use development is intended to support greater use of the planned bus-rapid transit system, and to justify the necessary infrastructure and utility expansion needed to support more industry in the area. Also, it protects surrounding agricultural land from the creep of subdivisions along the city's edges.



Source: City of Fresno

Locally-Driven Solutions

- Revitalizing downtown to attract and retain the “knowledge workers” who prefer vibrant urban centers and who will help Fresno close their skills gap – as well as increasing property values and tax revenue.
- Passing the Infill Development Act and BUILD Act, which waive fees on eligible infill projects and identify public and private loans, incentives, and tax rebates that would help to close the risk gap between investing in infill versus greenfield development.
- Promoting “catalyst projects” in Downtown, the Fulton Corridor, and Mixed-Use Centers to stimulate private investment.
- Designing a park and trail system that delivers recreation opportunities, mobility around the city, scenic and air quality buffers along transit corridors, and enhanced groundwater infiltration.

Local/Regional Connection

Fresno seeks to be a role model for good growth management planning, environmental quality, and a strong economy, particularly within the San Joaquin Valley. With its emphasis on dense development that facilitates walkability and the protection of natural resources, the General Plan actionizes the Smart Growth Principles laid out by the *San Joaquin Valley Blueprint*, a collaborative output of eight Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the Valley. In addition, Fresno led the design and organization of the Smart Valley Places Network, a partnership with 13 other Central Valley cities that builds on the Blueprint by supporting smart growth land use and transportation projects. The General Plan also complies with the Fresno Council of Governments' *Sustainable Communities Strategy* adopted in 2014, which will allow the City to capitalize on California Environmental Quality Act streamlining opportunities for future projects.

Sprawl and unincorporated community development competes with and threatens the success of sustainable development within city boundaries. Fresno hopes the General Plan will position it to work with other Central Valley cities and regional organizations to pass policies to curb those trends.

Agency Collaboration for Action

Every department was challenged to contribute to this new vision of Fresno, and one of the seminal achievements of this collaboration was the transformation of the Utility Department's approach to procuring water for the city. Traditionally, groundwater pumped from the underlying aquifer supplied 88% of Fresno's water supply, supplemented by surface water. The city's water table had fallen 100 feet in 80 years due to overdraft, contributing to groundwater contamination in about half the city's service area.

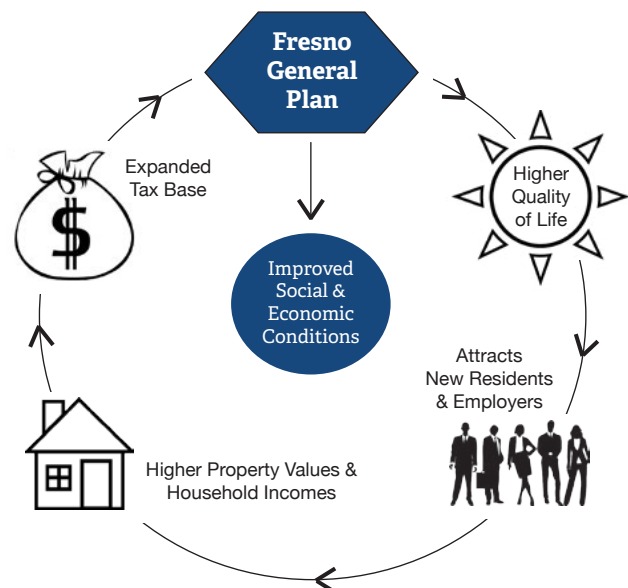
The City should continually treat its land use, economic, and fiscal performance as fundamental, and integrally linked components that over the long-run will rise and/or fall together.

In the past, when Fresno needed additional water for its growing population, it would annex new areas to the City to expand its sphere of influence. To disrupt that pattern, the General Plan maintains the current sphere of influence, thereby

incentivizing the investment needed for new treatment facilities for water from the San Joaquin and Kings Rivers. The new water treatment plant will reduce groundwater use by more than half and cost less to operate than pumping water from the aquifer. The General Plan calls for the implementation of Fresno's *Urban Water Management Plan*, which outlines projects for extensive water conservation, groundwater recharge, stormwater collections, and ultimately the use of its recycled water in green spaces and for industrial uses.

Effective Community Engagement

The City of Fresno was determined to include its residents in the creation of the General Plan—particularly those who would not normally participate in the planning process—and to give them the tools necessary to voice their needs and understand their



Source: Kearns & West



By developing more densely within its current boundaries, Fresno aims to preserve the surrounding agricultural land.

Source: City of Fresno

choices. To connect with immigrants and poor or disenfranchised residents, the City partnered with community organizations that already had long standing relationships within these communities, including Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries, the West Fresno Family Resource Center, and the Fresno Metro Ministry. Together, they were able to generate monetary and logistical support for outreach from the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities grant program and ultimately reach more than 4,000 residents.

In summer 2011, the outreach team funded a series of potlucks, featuring food and music from Laos, Mexico, and the American South. Attendees were taught key planning terms in Spanish, Mixteco, Hmong, and English, and were introduced to planning concepts and tools via mapping activities, role-play, and group dialogue. Art projects were encouraged as a way for community members to express themselves. Between August and November, organizers conducted more than 850 individual interviews with residents in multiple languages, which they distilled into nine community priorities that serve as the General Plan framework.

Planning alternatives built from this input were shared with the community for feedback. The planning team contrasted plans using RapidFire impact assessment, a tool that projects the impacts of different planning choices. For instance, RapidFire provides each alternative's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, household costs, land consumption, vehicle miles traveled per capita and fuel use, public health, building energy, water consumed, and operations and maintenance costs. These analyses helped residents better understand how different plan choices would impact their own expenditures and the environment.

City staff made over 100 presentations to neighborhood, business, educational, social, and non-profit groups and held more than 20 workshops addressing various parts of the proposal and alternatives report. In April 2012, the City Council's meeting to vote on the General Plan alternatives attracted more than 350 people. 80 of the 86 who gave testimony spoke in favor of Alternative A, the most environmentally progressive and fiscally sustainable selection, which the City Council approved with only minor changes.

Sustainability Benefits for California

Implementation of the *Fresno General Plan* will help to advance many of California's sustainability objectives, particularly in the areas of:

- Clean air and water
- Economic Prosperity
- Equity
- Improved infrastructure systems
- Infill and compact development
- Reduced automobile usage and fuel consumption
- Revitalized urban and community centers

For More Information

Name: Keith Bergthold, Executive Director
Agency: Fresno Metro Ministry
Telephone: 559-485-1416, ext 101
Email: keith@fresnometmin.org
Website: <https://www.fresno.gov/darm/general-plan-development-code/>