

## **No-growth strategy provides a better blueprint for region**

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On June 26, Modesto citizens were offered a workshop to develop a "blueprint for the valley's future," as part of the Stanislaus Council of Governments long-range planning effort for the county. The meeting was widely advertised and preceded by an article in The Bee ("Help develop blueprint for the valley's future") urging resident participation in the planning process.

The question posed was this: How best to handle the county's projected population growth from today's 500,000 to 1.2 million in 2050?

Of Modesto's 200,000 residents, only 9, including myself, were sufficiently interested to attend.

Previous studies and workshops had crystallized concerns into eight areas -- land use, transportation, education, government, public safety, environment, economy and community. A power point presentation offered four scenarios of change on the effect of this population growth and how we respond to it -- baseline (no change), some change, moderate change and major change.

Change was defined primarily by mandating new growth be diverted from single-family dwellings (now 91 percent of new homes) to multifamily dwellings. In the "major change" future, 64 percent of new homes would be single family and 36 percent multifamily. Slide after slide showed the wondrous benefits of such a transition in reduced consumption of energy, better water use, less air pollution, less congestion, better transportation, education and so forth -- for the 700,000 who would be added to the county's population!

Nowhere was it recognized that the total air pollution, water consumption, energy consumption, miles traveled, etc. would increase under even the best scenario for the original 500,000 inhabitants. I and several of the nine assembled asked different questions. Instead of adjusting to unlimited growth, why not ask:

"What is the carrying capacity of the Central Valley and Stanislaus County?"

"How many people, regardless of how they are housed, can we comfortably accommodate given limited water, energy, farm land and space?"

Why accept as inevitable the addition of 700,000 more souls into an unchanging land space?

What are the options for limiting or slowing growth?

These questions clearly did not please the planning staff. There was no "slow or stop growth" scenario that might have shown a lowered effect on our environment than even the best-growth future. And they were clearly not prepared to even discuss this approach. Growth was "inevitable," and that was that.

No- or slow-growth ideas are an anathema to planners, builders and businesses who believe all growth is not only inevitable but good, and some growth is better. But is it? Our unemployment rate is unchanged over 50 years, congestion worse, traffic increased, water supplies lessening, energy resources under strain and prime ag land disappearing. If this has happened in county that has grown from 150,000 in 1960 to 500,000 today, will the county be as livable when 1.2 million live here in 2050? Will Modesto be livable at 500,000?

Some communities have said "no" to unlimited expansion, and made it stick.

A suggestion to StanCOG: Add another scenario. "Real, real change," in which growth is limited and, in time, levels off at well under

1.2 million county residents. I guarantee, more than nine people will show up for your workshops.

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