

# San Joaquin Valley growth woes intrigue scholars elsewhere

**Garth Staple, Modesto Bee, 5-16-10**

Fascinating growth issues around Modesto are capturing the fancy of scholars in places such as Illinois, New York and even Paris.

Interest in rampant sprawl before the recession has evolved into morbid curiosity at the valley's subsequent foreclosure scourge. Other nonvalley academics are drawn by misery and lack of representation in poor neighborhoods resulting from past land-use decisions.

"The valley is a great laboratory," said David Hosley, president of the Great Valley Center based in Modesto. "Because the Central Valley is so large and is growing so quickly, we are a great place to study what works and what doesn't when it comes to development."

Experts within the valley, often at universities and the Great Valley Center, continue producing studies and papers on a host of social and land-use topics. But recent attention from planning-minded outsiders may be unprecedented.

In the past couple of years, Modesto has played the main character in the dissertation of a French graduate student and has figured prominently in a working paper produced by an assistant law professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

A University of Illinois student based her doctoral dissertation on valley planning. And a New York University professor who also teaches at Princeton University soon will publish a book with density data gathered from 120 cities around the globe, including Modesto.

"Everything I read in scholarship and newspapers, people are sick and tired of hearing about Los Angeles and New York," said Marisa Zapata, the former Illinois student whose work in Modesto helped her land an assistant professor's post at the University of Cincinnati. Her students in Ohio, required to study her work, now are versed in the Central Valley's planning processes.

Michelle Wilde Anderson, the Berkeley assistant law professor, became acquainted with poor pockets of unincorporated areas in Modesto as part of a legal team investigating complaints of residents seeking help. Some neighborhoods have no municipal sewage or sidewalks and people often wait longer for law enforcement than those within the city, just across the street.

"The more I learned about the unincorporated areas outside Modesto, the more they reminded me of African-American communities in the South," said Anderson, who then researched similar problems in Texas, Florida and North Carolina for an article published in the UCLA Law Review. Such areas often are surrounded by or contiguous to city limits but struggle with substandard services.

"The Central Valley is certainly not alone," she continued, "but it is among those regions of the country most impacted by the intersection of those problems. Put quite simply, the Central Valley is a morally compelling place for Californians who care about rural and suburban poverty."

## **Drawn by unique geography**

The valley's unique geography, with its rich farmland surrounded by air pollution-trapping mountains, drew

geopolitical student Hugo LeFebvre all the way from France. His focus switched to Modesto's history of sprawl and efforts to combat farmland loss, culminating with 2008's Measure E, a successful ballot initiative wresting from government leaders their power over new subdivisions outside cities.

"You have to know the Central Valley to understand the United States of America. Most American people live in small cities," said LeFebvre, whose research turned into a master's dissertation in Paris. That led to a stay in Berkeley, where he is a visiting scholar doing doctorate work on the Northern San Joaquin Valley's foreclosure crisis, which, he and others say, is a direct result of crazed growth a few years ago.

LeFebvre also is teaming with Alex Schafran, a Berkeley doctoral candidate, to explore how the valley's crisis is affecting the Bay Area.

Shlomo Angel, a professor of planning history in New York, chose Modesto among 120 cities he's studying for the soon-to-be-released "The Dynamics of Global Urban Expansion," he said in April at a Harvard University journalism forum.

### **Hot topic for planners**

He's combining satellite imaging with historical maps and population data to show that most of the world's major cities are decreasing in density -- a hot topic in the San Joaquin Valley's planning circles.

"I believe urban sprawl is now a global concern" with deeper implications for developing countries, Angel said. "It's not enough to do it locally."

Building more train tracks, including high-speed rail through the valley, often is associated with more compact living, he acknowledged, but may not be realistic for spread-out communities.

Zapata hopes to win a grant for a summer study on why some communities engaged in the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint process toward regional governance, and why others didn't. Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties were known for dragging their feet in that effort.

Hosley said he typically receives one or two contacts each month from people studying valley topics. For example, Tiffany Chao, a University of Southern California graduate student, produced a thorough study with two others this month on suburban infill development that included a case study on Modesto. The city was chosen for its track record of "unmanaged growth." The study recommends incentives for infill development as opposed to sprawl.

Insights from experts can help the valley "do a better job of growing and planning for the future," Hosley said.

"People in academic circles want to see if we can intentionally control growth and maintain ag lands as we grow rapidly," he continued. "So it's not a surprise that people are looking at what we're doing here."