

Experts say densely settled Modesto is way of future

J.N. Sbranti, Modesto Bee, 10-11-12

MODESTO -- Modesto packs twice as many people and homes into every square mile as Escalon and Sonora do.

Even compared with other big valley cities — such as Stockton, Fresno and Sacramento — Modesto's population and housing density is much higher.

But population booms in Riverbank and Ceres have made those towns the region's most crowded, recently released Census Bureau statistics show.

Urban planners long have pushed for higher density as a way to save farmland, lower costs and deliver city services more efficiently.

Not much progress toward that goal was made during the past decade, however, and census calculations show some valley towns — such as Patterson — headed the opposite direction.

Convincing valley folks to live closer together has not been easy, but planning experts insist that's the way of the future.

"You're just not going to be able to afford sprawl," warned Mike Dozier, who leads the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. "We need to save our farmland, direct growth into the cities and have smaller lot sizes."

Dozier called Modesto "one of our best-planned cities in the valley," partly because its housing units — houses and apartments — are significantly closer together than elsewhere in the region.

Census takers in 2010 counted 2,035 housing units per square mile within the Modesto city limit, compared with just 968 in Ripon, 805 in Sonora and 893 in Livingston.

That's a good thing, according to Brent Sinclair, Modesto's director of community and economic development. He said keeping housing compact makes it more affordable to provide city services.

"Every time a road or a water line or a sewer line is extended, it has to be maintained," Sinclair explained. The farther out infrastructure spreads, the more it costs.

Besides, more and more people prefer living closer together, Dozier contends. "The older you get, the more you're looking to downsize," said Dozier, adding that people increasingly want to be able to walk to stores and restaurants.

Young adults also prefer high-density urban settings, according to Dozier.

"They like being downtown ... because they've got things to do there," Dozier said. Rather than wanting big back yards and spacious houses, he said they prefer tighter living quarters near the action. "They don't spend much time in their rooms. They're out and about. It's almost an evolutionary thing."

San Francisco — where tiny, high-priced apartments are the norm — can squeeze 8,042 housing units into a square

times more than Sonora's.

But is that how people really prefer to live?

Nope, at least not according to home builder Toni Raymus, who runs Raymus Homes and has subdivisions in Oakdale and Manteca.

Raymus said young adults may enjoy the excitement of big-city life, "but when they get married and they have children, they crave the kind of home they grew up in." She said that's why most new home buyers want single-family houses on lots that are at least 5,000 square feet.

While urban planners may favor more compact developments, Raymus said valley home buyers don't like them. She learned that the hard way.

Back in 2004 when the housing market was hot, Raymus said her company built a higher-density development in Manteca called Mikey's Place.

"It was a cute little project with 3,500-square-foot lots. We had 10 of them, and we still own six. People did not want to buy them. The market wasn't there at all," Raymus recounted. "Buyers vote with their pocketbooks. We can't force people to live different than they want to."

Sinclair still believes compact housing units can be popular, if they're built in the right location.

"If you're out on the periphery of a city, you don't have the advantages of urban life around you," said Sinclair, speculating on why small-lot subdivisions might not sell well. He thinks condominiums built on redeveloped land or infill property near a city's core, however, could attract those looking to downsize or live within walking distance of work.

Modesto may start offering developers incentives to build downtown, Sinclair said. Downtown lofts have been pitched before, but virtually none were built during the past decade.

Plenty of other types of housing units, from giant upscale homes to government-subsided apartments for low-income residents, were built in Modesto from 2000 through 2010.

In fact, census tallies show Modesto's housing stock increased by 11.7 percent during those 10 years, even though the city's population increased only 6.5 percent.

Housing had lagged behind population gains the decade before that. From 1990 to 2000, the number of Modesto residents grew by 14.6 percent, while housing increased only 10.4 percent.

Because of that, Modesto's population density was virtually the same in 2010 as it was in 1990 — about 5,456 people per square mile.

That wasn't the case in Patterson. Its population density in 1990 was 5,074 per square mile, but by 2010, that had dropped to 3,431. That's because Patterson's borders more than tripled during those 20 years, which more than compensated for its 137 percent increase in residents.