

Effort to limit Valley sprawl hits crucial stage

Russell Clemings, Fresno Bee, 1-5-10

San Joaquin Valley leaders spent three years hammering out a plan to control urban sprawl. That was the easy part.

Now, as the Valley Blueprint Planning Process enters its fourth year, regional planners are shifting their focus to a thornier issue: How to change decades-old development patterns and put more people on less land.

For Fresno County, the Blueprint calls for an average of eight homes per acre in future development, compared with 3.8 under existing trends. That's more than a doubling of current densities.

Getting there is going to involve shaking both builders and their customers out of long-standing habits that favor sprawl over compactness.

"The local builders are very dialed into a detached, single-family residence" form of development, said David Fey, deputy city planner in Clovis, which is revising its general plan to reflect Blueprint principles.

To achieve higher housing densities, that preference for detached homes will have to change, planners say. Future development will have to consist of fewer one-family homes and more apartments, condominiums and townhouses.

And for that to happen, everything from consumer preferences to the mortgage financing system will need to adjust.

"For the types of housing that would actually help us get to higher densities, the institutional barrier is that in many cases they can't get loans," said Barbara Steck, deputy director of the Council of Fresno County Governments and a leader in the Blueprint effort.

One reason why, she said, is that some lenders require a large share of the units in a condominium project to be under contract for sale before they will write mortgages on any of them. That can create a circular dilemma — projects can't get financing until they have enough buyers, but can't get many buyers without financing.

Builders are apprehensive about the changes even as they're shifting to smaller houses on smaller lots as a result of the recession, said Michael Prandini, president and chief executive officer of the Building Industry Association of Fresno and Madera Counties.

"The era of the 10,000-square-foot lot is gone," Prandini said. "Those lots will still be out there but they won't be typical."

More two-story homes are in the offing, he said. So are apartments and mixed-use developments that combine housing, offices and stores, sometimes in the same building.

At the same time, a recent state law is exerting pressure that supports the Blueprint densities.

Senate Bill 375, enacted in late 2008, requires local agencies to provide for greenhouse-gas reductions in long-

term housing and transportation plans, and promises more state funding in those areas for those who comply. That gives Blueprint advocates a powerful carrot to use in getting their ideas implemented.

“Our new general plan definitely will be taking into account SB 375 and the planning issues we discussed in the Blueprint process,” Selma City Manager D-B Heusser said.

Among the measures that city will consider early this year is a decrease in the minimum lot size from 7,000 to as little as 5,000 square feet. Even smaller lots could be developed with City Council approval, Heusser said.

The next step in the Blueprint process is scheduled to get under way in February when a consultant starts work on a “toolkit” of planning techniques aimed at helping local agencies implement the Blueprint guidelines.

Some examples: Model zoning codes, case studies showing how other communities have handled similar planning issues, and a primer on legal issues. The work is scheduled to be completed in October.

Cities are eager for the results, Steck said.

“It’s encouraging to me to hear our member agencies call us and want to talk about the Blueprint as they’re doing their general plan updates,” she said. “They’re thinking about it as they’re going through the planning process.”