

OPINION by Veronica Garibay: Hey Fresno, democracy requires sunshine

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The Fresno Bee's editorial board said on Monday that the revised Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) plan is a better fit. A better fit for whom? And at what cost?

City of Fresno administration officials have repeatedly said that the BRT system, with its promise of faster, more reliable and cleaner transportation, is an integral part to a 2035 general plan update that focuses on productive growth in the inner city.

The Fresno City Council voted in April 2012 on a general plan that mandated 45% of new residential growth be infill development, which is synonymous with inner city development. But according to a Sunday article in The Bee, details were few because administration officials wanted a better sense of "what the public, in particular developers, would stomach."

What about what the majority of Fresnans will stomach? What about the residents that filled city council chambers in April 2012? Who is asking what the average Fresnan thinks? Certainly not the Fresno City Council. No one seems to be advocating for the average citizen.

The Bee article goes on to state, "The general plan update draft is still weeks away from public viewing, but the mayor and an advisory committee (Council President Steve Brandau, Council Members Lee Brand and Oliver Baines, private sector leaders and city officials) have come up with a dozen or so ideas." This begs the question: Who are these private sector leaders and who or what do they represent?

According to The Bee, the new details before the council call for 42% infill, compared with 45% that was called for and passed in 2012, and 58% new growth, compared to 55%. (However, our review of the council agenda does not include any discussion of these or other changes to the general plan). Granted, according to city officials, there is no new growth proposed for north Fresno, but there are still existing neighborhoods that need to be complete before any new growth takes place anywhere else. We have the infrastructure in place. We have the neighborhoods in place. We have residents willing to roll up their sleeves and work with City Hall to improve their neighborhoods. Let's make what we have better.

The BRT plan that is scheduled to be voted on today is a side note. It's true that the plan will be cheaper, the infrastructure will be limited, and Shaw Avenue will be served. Frankly, though, the buses should be longer to accommodate more people. And regarding money, the plan was just fine the way it was. Government grants would have funded construction, and other grants would have paid for the first three years of operation.

BRT is needed and this is a start, but the real discussion here is politics as usual in Fresno. Who was at the table to determine what plans and details would be presented at the city council? Have they already made up their minds? Is this just theater for the public?

As we move forward on the general plan, all Fresnoans should be given the same opportunity to provide input in the development of incentives, policies and creation of implementation programs that will shape the future development of Fresno before reaching a compromise on what the developers can stomach.

Closed door discussions and decision making about the future of the fifth largest city in California does nothing to build trust. In fact, it erodes any lingering trust in a city that through policy and practice has favored investment in wealthier neighborhoods over existing neighborhoods that, without investment and attention, face insurmountable challenges to become healthy and sustainable.

I must remind officials at City Hall that they represent all of Fresno and are accountable to all of its residents, not just private sector leaders.

So here we go again: Another major issue in the city and another attempt to commit democracy in the dark. And of course, by its very definition, you can't have democracy in the dark.

Democracy only works in sunshine.

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