

Curt Johansen: Downtown Fresno is ripe for boom

BY CURT JOHANSEN

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Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/20/3887039/curt-johansen-downtown-fresno.html?sp=/99/274/#storylink=cpy>

Old-timers remember when downtown Fresno was once a thriving commercial hub, and the tall buildings that still define the cityscape made economic sense to build. But as artist and author Larry Hill wrote in his Valley Voices essay in The Bee on March 29, development pushed outward while investment in downtown plummeted, even as efforts like the pedestrian-oriented Fulton Mall tried to bring people back.

Fresno now may be poised for a comeback. From the reconstruction of Fulton Street, and bringing major infrastructure investments such as Bus Rapid Transit and high-speed rail, Fresno — and the San Joaquin Valley as a whole — is predicted to boom.

But will Fresno and the surrounding region take advantage of the opportunity? Or will new growth be consigned to the business-as-usual practice of sprawling subdivisions, built over converted farmland, requiring residents to drive for basic errands and auto-commute to jobs and entertainment? The cost to our health, environment and economy from this pattern has been severe.

Instead, our best approach to achieving economically strong and desirable growth is through building and revitalizing within our existing cities on underutilized or vacant parcels of land, known as infill.

Consumers want communities with walkable neighborhoods and close access to jobs, stores and transit options.

These neighborhoods are appealing because they offer more options for housing types, conserve energy and water, improve air quality by reducing vehicle miles traveled, strengthen communities by integrating uses, incentivize public transit use, reduce household transportation costs, preserve prime farmland and improve municipalities' long-term tax base.

So why do we not see more of these desirable projects today?

The simple answer is our land-use regulations and laws. They — as well as our state, regional and municipal fiscal policies — promote and, in many cases, even underwrite outlying subdivision-style development. Our laws and planning policies have not caught up with the kinds of homes and neighborhoods that people want. But together we can change this dynamic.

Cities can level the playing field and incentivize sustainable development by tailoring development fees to the impacts each type of project creates on traffic, air quality, infrastructure capital and operational costs and lost open space and agricultural land.

Fresno is updating the development codes to incentivize affordable townhomes and apartments near city centers. Developers can partner with local institutions and governments to build catalytic infill projects for market segments such as students, professionals without children, and empty nesters.

These very strategies were enthusiastically received when the Council of Infill Builders, along with Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin as the keynote speaker, presented these findings to local business leaders and developers at Fresno State in October.

Meanwhile, regional planning efforts can rebalance transportation investments by focusing dollars on maintaining existing infrastructure and bolstering transportation choices such as walking, biking and transit. In addition, local and regional officials should plan for a future that mirrors housing trends, providing more opportunities for residents to live in compact, walkable communities.

State leaders can support the process by ensuring that the California Environmental Quality Act provides meaningful incentives and legal protections for sustainable, transit-oriented development in existing neighborhoods, along with true cost accounting for the environmental and public health impacts of unsustainable, auto-centric development.

Downtown Fresno — and the commercial centers of cities all around it — is ripe for a comeback. With the right mix of policies and resident engagement, we can bring back the excitement and activity that once characterized our vibrant downtowns.

We can remind the old-timers of what once made Fresno great, and we can inspire a new generation to embrace a different, positive vision of our city centers.

Curt Johansen is president of the Council of Infill Builders, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation of real estate professionals committed to improving California through infill development. The organization just released the report "Bringing Downtown Back: Ways to Boost Infill Development in the San Joaquin Valley." You can download the report at www.councilofinfillbuilders.org.