

Fresno's new blueprint for growth nears decisive vote

By George
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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin

FRESNO BEE FILE PHOTO

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- If you go

The city of Fresno has three key meetings coming up related to the proposed 2035 general plan update:

- **Fresno Planning Commission hearing**, 6 p.m. Monday, Dec. 8, City Council chamber, City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.
- **Fresno City Council hearing**, 5 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, Convention Center New Exhibit Hall, 848 M St.
- **Fresno City Council vote**, Dec. 18, time to be determined, City Council chamber

Get ready for what Fresno historians may come to call "Eleven Days In December."

Mayor Ashley Swearengin's 2035 general plan update is ready to meet its fate. Over the next 11 days, the proposed blueprint for growth is headed for the City Hall wringer.

The Planning Commission on Monday gets first crack. The commissioners make only recommendations.

The City Council on Thursday will hold a public hearing. The council decided only the Convention Center's New Exhibit Hall can handle the expected crowd.

Finally, on Dec. 18, Swearengin is slated to ask the council to vote. She wants nothing but "ayes" for a plan designed to remake the urban core and forever remove Fresno from every pundit's list of dysfunctional American cities.

"This is definitely a significant moment in the history of our community," Swearengin says.

Intent is the proposed plan's secret ingredient, she adds.

"We must intentionally pursue plans to revitalize our neighborhoods south of Herndon Avenue that have started to show wear and tear," Swearengin says.

But another "I" word figures to underscore the three meetings — intensity.



The council chamber in April 2012 was packed for two hearings to select a theme to guide the drafting of the plan. Council members said the full weight of City Hall should get behind inner-city development. Sprawl must end. Fresno's disadvantaged must get their fair share of a prosperous society's blessings.

It's no surprise that any plan shouldering such a mission would attract widespread interest. Now, as the plan's planning stage nears an end and the real work is about to begin, some civic leaders worry things are being rushed.

More than 20 nonprofits committed to quality-of-life issues sent a letter to City Hall saying they want more time to review and comment on the plan. Mary Savala, an official with the League of Women Voters of Fresno, says the public deserves more time. Michael Prandini, president of the Building Industry Association of Fresno and Madera Counties, also wants another 30 to 60 days.

On top of that, the City Council itself is facing uncertainty. The proposed plan would be Fresno's land-use covenant for the next 20 years. Council Member Blong Xiong is being termed out in early January. It will be left to his successor Esmeralda Soria, to help turn the plan's words into action.

Should Xiong, well-versed with the plan, cast the District 1 vote? Or should everyone wait for Soria to be sworn in, even if she has a steep learning curve?

No more waiting, the mayor says. "We have talked a long time."

Been there, done that

A challenge for the new plan is what will soon be the old plan.

The 2025 general plan is headed for history's dustbin. But in its youth, the 2025 plan was the apple of Fresno's eye, the can't-miss guide to a bright and egalitarian future.

The 2025 plan was sent to the City Council by then-Mayor Alan Autry in May 2002. The Bee at the time called it the "long-awaited" plan. Autry had been mayor for only 17 months.

Autry in the November 2000 election had convincingly beaten Dan Whitehurst, a former mayor and one of the city's most popular politicians in his heyday, largely on his promise to eliminate the "tale of two cities." No mayor in Fresno history took office with a stronger voter mandate to help the city's poor.

The 2025 plan was to be Autry's authority to act.

Autry has been gone from City Hall for six years, and his second term was but a shadow of his first. It's easy to forget now what a formidable political force he was. Autry was fearless in his quest to help Fresno's forgotten.

This was made brutally clear just weeks after he took office in 2001. Autry gave the public an early look at the 2025 plan. For example, he wanted to see 1,000 new dwellings and 1,000 rehabilitated dwellings in older neighborhoods before he would allow new development in north Fresno.

The developers went nuts. They couldn't believe Autry had let the public see the plan before them.

Autry said he didn't trust developers as far as he could throw them, and brought up Operation Rezone (the FBI's public corruption investigation in the 1990s) as proof of his wisdom.

"Guilt administered in the proper doses is a great motivator," Autry said.

The City Council approved the 2025 general plan in November 2002. "Implementation" was the word on everyone's lips.

What followed was years of mayoral action, all done for the benefit of Fresno's poorest and oldest neighborhoods.

Autry reformed the city's antiquated system of developer fees. He found a way — “linkage,” it was called — to spend suburban development fees on inner-city infrastructure. He put a scare in a poorly performing Fresno Unified School District by threatening to take it over. He kick-started the Regional Jobs Initiative to put the unemployed to work.

And he put the public's purse where his mouth was. It was on Autry's watch that millions were borrowed for neighborhood sidewalks, a downtown parking garage and Fresno Convention Center improvements. Millions were borrowed on the promise of a Mother Lode of developer fees to build new parks, many of them slated for the oldest neighborhoods. A huge bank loan was guaranteed so the Fresno Metropolitan Museum could become the anchor to transform Uptown. Another big bank loan was guaranteed so Granite Park would bring jobs to disadvantaged neighborhoods near Fresno State.

The 2025 general plan and the pro football player turned Hollywood actor turned big city reform mayor inspired it all.

Swearingin spent her first five years in office trying to keep Fresno out of bankruptcy court and figuring out where the 2025 general plan went wrong.

Just do it

The mayor's short answer: lack of will.

Swearingin at Thursday's City Council meeting explained her aim for the 2035 general plan.

She called it a “very historic document,” noting that this is only the sixth time (all coming after World War II) that Fresnoans have collaborated on a formal citywide growth plan.

Swearingin showed the council a map of Fresno. The city that began as a 19th century train stop now stretches from the San Joaquin River in the north to nearly Fowler in the south. The east side sneaks into Sanger Unified School District. The west side sprawls far past Highway 99.

And in the center of this huge city are immense swaths of poverty.

“The overwhelming concern, from my perspective, is the high concentration of poverty that exists in our city,” Swearingin said.

She said Fresno has only two options.

“We can look at this problem and say, ‘Oh, well, it's just the way it goes. We're not willing to change things enough to redirect the course of the city. It is what it is,’ ” Swearingin told the council. “I call that the ‘flee’ option. The other option is that we face this challenge and we do everything within our power and within our resources to fix it.

“ ‘To run or to fight’ is my mantra. My recommendation to you as legislators and to our community is that we turn and face this challenge.”

Fresnoans in the coming months will have more reading material than just the thick 2035 general plan. A reformed development code, the new general plan's influential sidekick, is coming early next year.

But the general plan will take pride of place in the next few weeks.

Swearingin told the council that, unlike the 2025 plan, the new blueprint includes an economic analysis. Infill development pays more dividends than suburban growth, she said.

Autry knew that. His problem was finding enough investors and home buyers to agree.

It's impossible to compress the 2035 general plan and new development code into a nutshell. Fresnoans attending meetings in the next two weeks will be sufficiently briefed if they keep in mind three of Swearingin's key points.

The first two: New growth is to be split roughly 50-50 between suburbia and infill; City Hall will pursue all the money it can get from Sacramento and federal government.

No. 3?

“Policy counts,” Swearingin said.

Conflict straight ahead

Council President Steve Brandau says he’s heard all the arguments on both the Xiong-or-Soria issue and the delay-or-act issue. He said he hasn’t made up his mind.

“The thing that drives me is this: Did the citizens get enough time to get comfortable with what the city is doing?” Brandau said.

Council Member Oliver Baines said the city has done “robust” public outreach. He says it’s not fair to wait for Soria, then wait again as she gets up to speed on a complex plan.

“I’m not sure that’s the best way to make public policy,” Baines says.

It’s also unclear how the plan will be received by the council. The April 2012 vote on the plan’s theme was 5-2. Sal Quintero and Clint Olivier, who are still on the council, voted no. Brandau, who took office in 2013, says he will oppose the plan.

“I’m not sure it can work,” Brandau says.

Council Member Lee Brand says he supports the plan.

Yes, Brand says, the plan is full of big dreams and the world is full of reality.

But, Brand adds, Fresno in the next half-century must not repeat the mistakes of the last half-century.

“We’ve got to try something.”

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