

Hundreds show up for hearing on Fresno's 2035 general plan

By George
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A large crowd was on hand during the 2035 general plan update hearing at the Fresno Convention Center on Thursday evening, Dec. 11, 2014. MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Fresno on Thursday couldn't get its fill of land-use talk.

An estimated 350 people gathered at the Convention Center New Exhibit Hall for the City Council's hearing on the proposed 2035 general plan update.

All of them didn't speak. But a lot did. And by all accounts just about everyone was keenly interested in Mayor Ashley Swearengin's blueprint for growth.

Ahead is next Thursday's City Council meeting. If all goes according to Swearengin's vision, the council will debate the plan and vote to adopt it.

The proposed plan, with its emphasis on inner-city development, is seen by many as one of the most important documents in Fresno history. That's why Council President Steve Brandau tweaked the usual formula for legislative action.

The norm is to do everything on one day in the council chamber — staff reports, public comment, council debate, vote. But Brandau knew doing everything at once would exhaust many and short-change democracy.

The plan and supporting documents total hundreds of pages. In a nutshell, Swearengin wants Fresno to begin the difficult task of slowing suburban growth and reinvesting in older neighborhoods. Fresnans have been chewing on the details in a variety of venues almost since the mayor took office in January 2009.

Thursday's hearing in the spacious New Exhibit Hall didn't break new ground.

Barbara Hunt, a longtime champion of southwest Fresno, was the first public speaker. She said City Hall must do more for challenged neighborhoods.

Some speakers said older parts of Fresno need more parks, safer streets, cleaner air.

Some said city officials should delay a vote until Fresno has had more time to study the plan.

Some channeled the spirit of former Mayor Alan Autry, who liked to say City Hall was prey to "paralysis by analysis."

Some had dug deep into the plan and requested specific changes that might have been small to others but were big to them.

The hearing was expected to continue late into the night.

Thursday's hearing tees up a dramatic conclusion to what has been another memorable year at City Hall.

It began in January with the City Council approving a contract to build Martin Ray Reilly Park in southeast Fresno and warily watching opponents to the new water rates.

City officials by summer were wondering if the mayor would leave in mid-term for higher office in Sacramento. They said goodbye to bankruptcy fears. They decided the water-rate battle required a different strategy.

The fall saw Swearingin put up a strong but losing effort in the controller's race. Esmeralda Soria won the District 1 council seat, assuring an end to the all-male council dais. A series of water hearings soothed no opponent's feelings.

The 2035 general plan update quietly moved forward through it all. Swearingin's defeat at the polls seemed to energize her sense of municipal duty. Suddenly (or so it seemed to some critics), the update's final draft was headed to the council.

Parks, water, money, politics — this and so much more is in the plan. The council nearly three years ago approved a vision for the plan that seeks roughly half of future development to be of the infill variety.

It's not clear how much of past development has been inner-city and how much suburban. Percentages depend on what has been squishy definitions of infill and suburbia. No one, however, disputes that the urban core has been largely ignored for decades.

This explains why many city officials quietly view the new general plan's ideals with hard-won realism. They want the plan to pass. They want jobs, opportunity and equity for all. They want a renewed city.

Mostly, though, they want to reverse the long trend of inner-city stagnation, saving perfection for a later day.

As Council Member Lee Brand has said, "Just 20% or 25% infill development would change the arc of Fresno."

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