

Fresno City Council approves 'historic' general plan for growth

By Tim Sheehan



Fresno City Council President Steve Brandau sits at the dais during the Thursday, Dec. 18, 2014 council meeting with a six-pack of pansies. In response to a comment Brandau made in *The Bee* equating some naysayers to “pansies,” Gazebo Gardens Nursery gave away pansies to any resident who promised to take them to the meeting.

MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

The Fresno City Council took what some called an “historic” step Thursday night to curb a decades-old pattern of urban sprawl by approving the 2035 General Plan, a 20-year policy blueprint for the city’s future growth.

The 5-2 vote followed several hours of rigorous debate among the council members and culminates a process that began four years ago. But Mayor Ashley Swearengin, who championed the plan, said the real work is just beginning as the city now must take steps to implement the document’s vision.

“Excellent vision and excellent execution may not be enough,” she told the council. “We will all challenge each other to execute as best as we can.”

“Tonight it’s important to reflect on the historic nature of this vote, the fact that we as a community came together and said it’s time to start taking care of our existing neighborhoods,” Swearengin said moments after the vote. “I want to celebrate this occasion, and then tomorrow morning we’ll wake up and realize that we have so much work left to do.”

A primary focus of the plan is to encourage new residential and commercial development within the city's existing urban footprint, while still allowing for future growth into new areas.

City Council president Steve Brandau, whose proposal to eliminate from the plan a requirement for developers to make up for farmland lost to new subdivisions by conserving an equal amount of farmland elsewhere near the city, voted against the general plan update, as did City Council member Clint Olivier.

Brandau said he's no fan of urban sprawl, but he said he feared the plan would force developers to build infill projects that few people would want to buy, sending business to nearby communities with fewer restrictions. "If we build a product that forces people to move to Sanger or across the river to Madera, our people are going to move further away and create what we call regional sprawl," Brandau argued.

"In San Francisco or Sacramento, where my friends live, they need more high-density housing than Fresno," he added. "But there's a demand there. That's not Fresno."

As Brandau presided over the meeting, a container of flowering pansies sat on the dais in front of him — an anonymous jab after he penned an opinion piece in *The Bee* complaining that "some pansy in Sacramento thinks we need to live closer together and ride the bus."

Earlier Thursday afternoon, a handful of Fresno residents took advantage of a last chance to urge the City Council to postpone its vote, while others urged council members to reject a slew of changes requested by developers last week. Those changes were suggested, and later pitched by council members, after an hours-long public hearing last week at the Fresno Convention Center. Ashley Warner, a staff attorney for the Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability, said she believed the changes "are problematic" for the city because of requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act.

"These motions propose sweeping changes to residential densities ... and policies that form the backbone of the general plan," Warner told the City Council. She asserted that because the suggestions would create a different range of environmental effects than what has already been studied over the past several years in the plan's preparation — including air quality, the number of vehicle miles that people would drive because of fewer homes per acre, and greater loss of farmland — the city would be required to recirculate the environmental documentation for public review.

Some of those changes were rejected by the council, and others were referred to the city's planning staff for additional review.

But rather than get caught up in the minutiae of the plan, the five-member council majority of Oliver Baines, Sal Quintero, Lee Brand, Paul Caprioglio and Blong Xiong — who was taking part in his last council meeting before leaving office — focused on the broader overall vision and the need to change how the city thinks about development.

"The model we have followed has not been successful," said Brand. "It has directly created the problems we face now" of deteriorating neighborhoods with crumbling infrastructure and falling property values.

Baines said his district in southwest Fresno includes many of the neighborhoods "that have been left behind," and said that builders rely on the city as much as the city relies on builders to fuel growth.

"You can't build houses unless we build roads, provide water, put in lights and provide services," he said. "You can ask any builder. If we don't put any infrastructure in a place, they're not going there."

Caprioglio noted that the plan represents a vision that will govern future policies for implementation — including a more detailed, yet-to-be written citywide development code that will spell out specific requirements for growth.

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