

To understand Fresno's growth, look at Fire Station 18 (video)

By George
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Fresno City Hall is chasing its own real estate profits at the same time it struggles to fix the mess that decades of equity addiction spurred throughout the city.

The tale of a lonely fire station explains all.

The City Council last month gave City Manager Bruce Rudd approval to buy Fire Station No. 18. Most of the 19 fire stations within the city limits are in city-owned buildings on city-owned land. Station 18 is in a developer-owned, single-family residence in a housing project west of Highway 99.

The selling price for the lot and house: \$385,000. The seller: Grantland Avenue LLC, a part of the same Assemi family empire that owns Granville Homes, builder of Station 18's neighborhood.

The city pays rent of about \$1,500 a month. Rudd said it doesn't make sense to keep paying rent when Station 18's current site is merely a temporary solution.

"It could be another four or five years before we build a permanent station," Rudd said. "It didn't seem wise to continue dumping money into property we don't own."

Rudd said the city is buying Station 18 at appraised value. Granville president Darius Assemi said he was happy to sell when Rudd made the offer. The proposal sailed through the City Council.

The city's investment could be worth well over \$400,000 by the time Station 18 moves to long-term digs, Rudd said. City Hall, he added, would have no problem finding a use for \$25,000 or more in house-flipping profit.

But there's another way to judge Station 18's worth. It's also an object lesson in all the stresses and hopes now animating land-use debate in Fresno.

The council on Dec. 18 approved Mayor Ashley Swearingin's 2035 general plan, the blueprint for future growth. The vote culminated six years of mayoral effort, not to mention the expenditure of a small fortune in taxpayer dollars.

The crux of the plan is simple: Sprawl must end, older neighborhoods must revive.

The plan's inspiration is just as clear: A city blessed in so many ways should not tolerate the stark contrast that exists today between Fresno's haves and have-nots.

The long run-up to the general plan vote revealed a hole in this vision. What went wrong with Fresno society that its recovery requires a document full of such lofty promises? Life for the most part is messy. Conflicting opinions abound on how Fresno went off the tracks.

The life and times of Fresno Fire Station 18 can provide some fodder to chew on, perhaps even clarity. The station has the advantage of being located in an apt spot to perform such a feat.

Said Council Member Lee Brand: "That's definitely sprawl."

Highway's expansion was key

Station 18 at 5938 N. La Ventana Ave. is only a decade old. But its genesis goes back to the 1950s. That's when California decided to modernize Highway 99.

Highway 99 in the years immediately after World War II was a disaster from Bakersfield to Red Bluff. Motorists had to endure 16 traffic lights just on the stretch of 99 that ran through downtown Fresno. Broadway, believe it or not, used to be part of the highway.

Fresno leaders obsessed more about 99's future than Fulton Mall. As early as 1953, plans were made to demolish Faretta's Cafe in downtown to make way for the new highway. Faretta's was reputed to be the first place to legally sell liquor after Prohibition ended in 1933.

A nearly six-mile piece of modern highway opened in central Fresno in 1957. By 1964, cars were zipping unimpeded on 99 from Kingsburg in the south to the San Joaquin River in the north.

One of the controversies was where to put the new highway in Fresno. Follow the path of the old highway as closely as possible? Or bend the highway so west Fresno wasn't cut off from the rest of town?

No mystery about which option was picked. West Fresno isn't real big, but it's one of Fresno's oldest and most historic neighborhoods. With a large African-American population and anchored by the iconic Edison High School, it became increasingly important politically as the Civil Rights era progressed. Everyone talked about helping west Fresno, but not much got done.

The modernization of Highway 99 in the mid-20th century did something else. It solidified the direction of Fresno's growth.

The conventional wisdom is that Fresno, located on flat ground surrounded by retirement-minded farmers eager to sell the homestead to the highest bidder, began in the 1950s a decades-long sprawl across the land.

But there was a map's logic to the developers' ambition. The modernization of 99 completed the geographic funnel that would shape Fresno's growth for the next 50 years. On one side was the wide highway. On the other side was Clovis, which would grow at an even faster pace than Fresno. At the top of the funnel was the San Joaquin River, a natural magnet for Fresnans as far back as the early 20th century when trolley service reached Fresno Beach.

Then, as the 20th century neared its end, something inevitable happened. The funnel started to reach capacity. Developers looked around for new places to satisfy market demand.

West of 99 beckoned.

It is, Granville's Assemi said, "truly the last frontier of Fresno."

Making the hard jump

West-of-99 came to mean two things in the development community and at City Hall.

First, west Fresno rarely figured in a developer's construction dreams. Part of the reason is west-of-99 geography. The cemeteries near Belmont Avenue and, later, the rise of Roeding Business Park, form a barrier of sorts between the long-developed streets of west Fresno and the wide-open spaces further up the highway.

Second, the 1980s' initial push of homes and retailers into west-of-99 didn't seem to energize city officials. Various plans for order came and went. But there wasn't a sense of regulatory urgency from officialdom.

"It was really just a hodge-podge that never worked," said Council Member Brand, a former planning commissioner with decades of private-sector real estate experience.

There was a development lull in part of the 1990s, Brand said, then developers at the turn of the century made a second move on the other side of 99.

“There was a better product this time,” Brand said.

Demand for homes soared. The big problem facing west-of-99 developers was infrastructure. Station 18 is an example.

Granville in 2004 wanted to build a single-family housing project near the corner of Grantland and Bullard avenues, at the north end of the west-of-99 area. Go ahead, City Hall said, but you can build only on every other lot. The reason: The area isn’t within a three-mile running distance of the nearest fire station.

Highway 99 was the hang-up. There was no spot between Herndon Avenue on the north and Shaw Avenue on the south to get from one side to the other.

However, City Hall gave Granville some hope. Build us a fire station in your project, city officials said, and you can put a house on every lot.

That’s how Granville’s La Ventana housing project came to have Station 18. It’s located on a cul-de-sac amid other homes going for a third-of-a-million dollars or more. Engine 18 is stored in a special garage built at city expense. Unlike other houses in the project, Engine 18 has direct access to Bullard for service calls.

Station 18 gets about 800 calls for service per year, less than 25% of the volume at the busiest stations.

Rudd knows the story of Station 18 by heart. The city didn’t get a fire station, it got a suburban house that was turned into a fire station. The city didn’t get the station for free; it paid thousands in rent every year. Then the city is now forking over \$385,000 for a facility to house a firefighter crew that hardly gets enough business to justify its existence.

He promises such a scenario will never happen again.

“I don’t know the answer then,” Rudd said when asked why City Hall made the deal with Granville in 2004. “I know what the answer is now.”

Well-intentioned bond

Of course, City Hall knew all along that putting Station 18 in a tract house was a stop-gap measure.

That’s why city officials a decade ago were also making plans for a public safety bond. They would borrow their way to infrastructure heaven.

Here, too, things didn’t turn out quite right.

The housing boom of 2002 to 2007 inspired city officials to build better facilities for police officers and firefighters. The result in 2008-09 was the \$43 million public-safety bond, the proceeds divided between the fire and police departments.

The fire department’s plan was to rebuild in two phases. Phase I called for the construction of a handful of high-priority stations. Station 18, being relatively new, was in Phase II.

The bond carried an annual bill of more than \$3 million. About half of the payment was to come from the city’s new system of developer impact fees.

What happened next is hardly a secret. The housing market began tanking in 2008 and nosedived during the next few years. The Great Recession arrived. Developer fees dried up. Station 18’s rebirth was put on hold, leading to Rudd’s decision to buy the facility.

But these events were doubly painful for Station 18.

The city had already bought a parcel on Shaw Avenue, west of Highway 99, for the permanent station. The site was better located to protect existing houses and businesses. The site also was well-positioned to serve Westlake Village, Granville's 430-acre master-planned residential-commercial project planned for an area bounded by Gettysburg, Garfield, Shields and Grantland avenues.

Granville's developer fees would help fund the bond that was to pay for the new Station 18. On top of that, City Hall as far back as 2002 had seen Westlake as the key to bringing order to west-of-99's sprawl. That the site is in the city's sphere of influence (making it subject to annexation at some point) only made Westlake a more effective tool for fixing the nearby chaos.

City officials reasoned that Westlake would deliver a marquee lifestyle product that gave west-of-99 cachet among the consumers who usually looked to north Fresno and Clovis. With Westlake thriving and the long-planned Veterans Boulevard providing an effective link with northwest Fresno, city officials thought, the rest of west-of-99 could be molded into something logical.

Then Assemi surprised everyone last fall when he said Westlake was being put on hold. He said the decision had nothing to do with his frustration with a 2035 general plan that, in his opinion, is not sufficiently kind to edge-of-city developers. He said the west-of-99 market simply isn't ready for Westlake. He said he is turning Westlake's dirt into almond orchards.

As far as Station 18 is concerned, maybe it's just as well. Fire Chief Kerri Donis said the Shaw Avenue site is actually a bit small for the kind of single-story permanent station typical for the department. There's also only about \$2 million in the bank for a project that typically costs about \$4 million.

"Bruce is committed to getting us out of that temporary station," Donis said. "It was really contingent on the Westlake development going forward. Then that came to a screeching halt."

Jockeying for position

Events connected to Station 18 promise to gnaw at City Hall in the new year.

Mayor Swearengin by spring said she'll bring to the City Council a reformed development code. These rules will be the tool that makes a reality of the 2035 general plan's vision, she said.

The community activists who pushed for a general plan that trims the political power of developers vow to make sure Swearengin doesn't turn hypocrite.

The City Council will have a new look and old grievances.

Oliver Baines, whose District 3 includes historic west Fresno, will be the new council president. He very much wants that neighborhood, isolated so long ago by a modernized Highway 99, to get its fair share of development.

That mostly likely means doing something special with the old Running Horse site, now called Mission Ranch. The nearly 400 acres, about a mile west of Edison High, are owned by the Assemi family. The Assemis are growing almonds there.

Esmeralda Soria takes over for the termed-out Blong Xiong as District 1's council member. Her district is often seen as little more than the Tower District. In reality, much of it consists of west-of-99, including the Westlake orchards. She's keen on digging into west-of-99 planning challenges.

"To prepare for anticipated growth, I will ensure its residents have oversight and Fresno County leaders are part of the discussion," Soria said.

District 2's Steve Brandau, who yields the council president's gavel on Thursday, joined District 7's Clint Olivier in

voting against the new general plan. He said Fresnoans someday will wonder why the 2035 plan failed to wisely plan for west-of-99 growth.

“They can blame five councilmen and a mayor,” Brandau said.

Assemi said he wants a detailed west-of-99 growth plan. Rudd said he’s on the same page, but needs money to get it accomplished.

When all is said and done, though, it’s hard not to view west-of-99 issues through the Station 18 lens: Money.

Who has the leverage to get it from someone else?

Rudd said developers, not City Hall, should pay for growth.

City subsidies for sprawl “aren’t going to happen anymore,” he said.

Assemi sits contentedly on two immense almond orchards — Westlake and Mission Ranch — that are pivotal to City Hall dreams in two strategic infill areas. He can afford to wait.

“Once that area becomes a focus for the City Council and the city,” Assemi said, “then we will team up with them.”

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