

Fresno, Madera county supervisors discuss growth plans along San Joaquin River

By BoNhia
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Blueberry bushes, foreground, and vineyards, at the site of the McCaffrey's 5,200-home Tesoro Viejo development in Madera County, looking west towards Avenue 15, at top. JOHN WALKER/THE FRESNO BEE September 18, 2014

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Fresno and Madera county supervisors met in a joint meeting on Tuesday morning to discuss the future of development stretching along the San Joaquin River from Valley Children's Hospital into the foothills.

No formal decisions were made during the 2 1/2-hour meeting in Madera, which included talks about a Highway 41 transportation study and local groundwater management plans. But reports from county staff and comments made by the supervisors sent a clear message — growth is on the horizon and both counties need to be smart about how it's done.

"We're very proud to work with our colleagues on inter-agency things that are happening on the borders of our community," said Madera County board chairman David Rogers. "While we may not always agree on every issue, we do have a sense of unanimity and the value of both of our counties and the value of working together to see that we both prosper and do well."

The area north of the Fresno County line expanding into Madera's Valley floor has long been designated a growth area. The foothills at Friant and Millerton Lake have also been primed for development. Between the two areas, at

least 10 residential and commercial developments are planned with more than 25,000 housing units expected in the years to come.

Fresno County is conducting a study along a five-mile corridor of Friant Avenue to identify potential opportunities or barriers for recreation, conservation, tourism and commercial use.

The study, funded by developers, will be used to provide a framework for further planning if needed, said Bernard Jimenez, deputy director for Fresno County public works and planning department.

Projects in the Friant and Millerton Lake area include:

- Friant Community Plan, 2,500 housing units and 36 acres of commercial space.
- Millerton, 3,500 units and 66 acres of commercial space. A pharmacy school is also planned.
- Brighton Crest, 488 units.
- Ventana Hills, 91 units.
- Lakeview, 180 units.

In Madera, planning leaders worked with developers to respect the features of the river and the land in effort to preserve open spaces. The builders have answered with projects that follow the flow and ebb of the terrain.

Grading has started on the former Gateway Village project, now called Riverstone, at Avenue 12 and Highway 41, that follows the curves of the land instead of flattening it, said Norm Allinder, Madera County's director of community and economic development who also oversees planning.

The Rio Mesa developments that have been approved include:

- Gunner Ranch, 2,840 housing units and 3.9 million square feet of commercial space.
- Riverstone, 6,578 units on 2,062 acres with 280 acres of commercial.
- North Shore at Millerton, 2,966 units with 206 acres of commercial space.
- Tesoro Viejo, 5,190 units and 3 million square feet of commercial.
- Tra Vigne, 400 housing units.

Brent McCaffrey, president of McCaffrey Homes, proposed an opportunity on Tuesday to allow public access to the San Joaquin River on land his company owns.

The goal would be to create a connection between Madera and Fresno counties at Ball Ranch and Ledger Island. The Ledger Island bridge could then be used by the public to cross over into Madera County where people can use more than 50 miles of public trails.

In the future, an interpretive center, a canoe launch, or bait shop could be built along the river to enhance the experience.

Board members liked the proposal and instructed staff to work with the San Joaquin River Conservancy, which owns the bridge, Ball Ranch and Ledger Island to develop more information.

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