

Development Code: Fresno City Hall's next battlefield

By George
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Construction crews work on a residential apartment building at Fulton and San Joaquin Street in downtown Fresno in January. The city of Fresno, which just approved a new general plan intended to limit sprawl, is working on an overhaul of its development code that would implement that plan. Some developers are "hopeful" but wary of the changes.

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Fresno City Hall's to-do list of earth-shaking chores now looks like this:

Bankruptcy (avoid) — check.

General plan (approve) — check.

Water rates (approve) — check.

Don't think about relaxing, Fresno. The next big policy debate is just around the corner, and it's supposed to tie together the other three in a way that finally makes sense of recent events at City Hall.

We're talking about a new development code.

"The development code implements the general plan," says Jennifer Clark, director of the city's Development and Resource Management Department. "It allows flexibility for property owners to develop their properties in ways that enhance their community and the city."

Granville Homes Vice President Jeff Roberts describes the general plan as a car and the development code as the engine.

“You want the car to run,” Roberts says. “You have to have a good development code.” He adds that he’s been watching the new code wind its way through City Hall for several years.

“We’re hopeful” is all he can muster by way of Granville’s sentiments.

The timeline is the easy part of this story.

Fresno’s development code got its last overhaul in the early 1960s. Planning directors and city councils tweaked it periodically for a half-century. Mayor Ashley Swearengin a few years ago put her team to work on a full-scale code reform at the same it pursued a new general plan.

An advisory committee full of local planning and development experts met for 18 months to chew on code nuances. The committee is done with its work. Clark and her staff are polishing a draft.

Clark says the public should get its first look at the proposed code in late March. Two months of community meetings and staff presentations will conclude with a City Council vote in late May or early June. The new code is expected to go live July 1.

Don’t be fooled by all this administrative drudgery. There’s a fight brewing here.

All about details

It begins with complexity.

Roberts says a development code for a city as big and varied as Fresno has “millions of bits of information.” The current code, for example, says a new house must have a yard on each side at least five feet wide. Unless the house has an attached garage. Unless the house is on a corner lot. Unless the house is on a reversed corner lot. Unless the side lot of the house next door is less than five feet wide.

Development-code experts, it’s safe to say, appreciate the value of detail.

Yet, such detail plays a big part in defining the look and feel of a city. The City Council, planning staff and Granville recently tore into each other over whether the developer must build a small housing project with the mandated 20-foot driveways or could get by with 8-footers.

Different opinions on market demand, housing density and developer profit collided head-on. Unstated, but never far from anyone’s mind, was City Hall’s reputation (perhaps overblown) as a sucker for every squeal of outrage from a developer.

The new development code, even in draft form, is causing heartburn among some developers. Their worry: It will be long on utopianism and coercion, short on wisdom and flexibility.

The City Council in December approved the 2035 general plan update that promises nothing less than a revolution in Fresno’s development patterns. Sprawl is to slow to a crawl, if not end altogether. Inner-city development is to soar. Poverty won’t entirely disappear, but the vast swaths of concentrated poverty that shames Fresno on the national level will.

All of Fresno will then enjoy the fruits of a strong local economy, one blessed with access to plenty of water and the modernized infrastructure to deliver it. The threat of municipal bankruptcy that so terrorized city officials a few years ago will recede as Fresno fills with productive taxpayers.

So goes the thinking at City Hall. So goes the hopes of community activists who cheered the 2035 general plan’s

vision.

The only missing piece is a development code that delivers development.

Roberts says Granville looks forward to reviewing the draft code and suggesting reasonable changes.

A general plan with an anti-developer, anti-market development code “won’t catch the momentum it needs to succeed,” Roberts says.

Clark promises a development code with three virtues.

“Easy, flexible, clear.”

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