

# Fresno's 'River West:' Big hopes, big money ride on its design

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Fresno will soon draft plans to ensure that the area west of Highway 99 and north of Clinton Avenue develops in a wise and creative way.

Let's pause for the laughter.

Seriously, this chunk of land sometimes called Fresno's last frontier (when it's not altogether forgotten) is slated to get its own specific plan. Mayor Ashley Swearingin has set aside money in her proposed fiscal year 2016 budget to get the time-consuming process started.

Council Member Steve Brandau, whose northwest Fresno district includes part of this area, got things rolling recently when he asked the council to seek the mayor's support for such a plan.

"It's a hodgepodge out there," Brandau told his council colleagues April 30. "A specific plan would clean all that up and create a vision that people could develop. We're overdue for an overhaul."

Brandau even has a brand name for the area. It's to the west of much of Fresno. The San Joaquin River is nearby.

"I'm thinking of calling it River West," Brandau says.

No one agreed with the name. But no one came up with anything better.

District 1 Council Member Esmeralda Soria, who serves the center of River West, is a supporter.

"We see a lot of traffic and congestion," Soria says. "We've left a lot of neighborhoods with partially improved roads and a lack of sidewalks and bike lanes. We've heard these concerns for a number of decades. This is the right time to do it."

Council President Oliver Baines, whose District 3 reaches into the southern edge of River West, says good planning is key to economic development.

"That area has really complex land-use issues," Baines says. "This type of planning should have been done a long time ago."

With a 7-0 vote, River West was born.

It all begins with a study. I know people say Fresno spends a lot of money studying. But this has not been done before.

District 2 Council Member Steve Brandau

But there's more going on here than another study destined (in a skeptic's mind) for the City Hall basement. To wit:

- Remember SEGA? City officials once debated whether Fresno's newest suburbia would be the Southeast Growth Area or something to the west of 99. River West appears to have settled that question for now.
- The city is turning into specific-plan heaven. Fresnans for the past six years have chewed on the Fulton Corridor Specific Plan. City officials say it's almost here. Specific plans for the southwest and southeast portions of Fresno also are in the pipeline.

- The River West Specific Plan figures to reignite interest in two proposed projects that have largely dropped out of public sight — Veterans Boulevard and Granville Home’s Westlake master-planned community.

## **Plans complement each other**

A specific plan makes no sense without a general plan. Fresno got a new general plan in December. This growth blueprint for the next 20 years emphasizes reinvestment in older neighborhoods and promises an end to mindless sprawl.

City officials often describe a general plan as the view from 20,000 feet. Execution depends in large part on the development code (a new one for Fresno is also on the horizon). Specific plans are another part of turning a dream into reality.

A specific plan will, among other things, define land uses, describe transportation elements and address infrastructure challenges such as water and sewage.

But the adjective says it all: You’ve got a certain area, there’s something distinctive about its physical and cultural character, but a binding agent either withered over the years or never took root. The place just doesn’t work at its best. The solution is a plan tailored by residents and experts to the community’s specific needs and assets.

City Hall has probably never had a chief executive as committed to such detailed and codified planning as Swarengin. She hasn’t always had allies on the council dais. Perhaps these memories explain why she asked for the microphone on April 30 as council members prepared to vote.

“It does my heart good to hear council members asking for land-use planning in their districts,” Swarengin said with a smile.

Brandau voted against the mayor’s general plan.

## **Fresno’s forgotten land**

River West is like a huge triangle.

There is the 99/Union Pacific railroad corridor on one side. Fresno’s city limit (anything but a straight line) is on the other side. They meet in the north at the river to form the tip. The base in the south is near the tangle of Roeding Park cemeteries, industrial sites and Highway 180.

Ideally, Brandau says, 180 or Roeding Park would have been River West’s southern boundary. But, he adds, city officials told him that is too much to handle in one specific plan. So, everyone settled on Clinton.

The northern boundary to the Southwest Fresno Specific Plan area (think of Edison High School at its heart) is 180. That means a substantial niche of Fresno west of 99 (think of the Jane Addams Elementary School neighborhood near McKinley and Hughes avenues) is a specific-plan orphan.

Brandau had to define what ails River West.

For many residents there, Brandau told the council, “it’s a long way to get your ice cream.”

He got the expected courtesy laugh. Still, Brandau had memorably summed up City Hall’s planning challenge for the past quarter-century.

It is way overdue.

District 1 Council Member Esmeralda Soria on River West specific plan

This part of metropolitan Fresno for much of the 20th century was known mainly as home to Central High School, whose farm boys always played a tough brand of football. Then Fresno's residential growth in the 1980s and 1990s began spreading west as well as north.

Al Solis, a former city of Fresno planning director turned local development consultant, describes these pioneering projects as "arms" of rooftops extending in haphazard fashion into farmland. In-between, Solis says, were "fjords" of rural life, be they crops or 2- or 3-acre lots with house, two-car garage, swimming pool and room for a horse.

City and county officials had a land-use mess on their hands.

Government officials weren't indifferent to events. Solis says Fresno County in this period created a plan for west of 99. "It didn't go anywhere," he says.

City Hall for much of the 1990s worked on a specific plan for Highway City, the one-time railroad shipping burg at 99 and Shaw Avenue that evolved into something of a trucking center. The planning area, most of it west of 99, was tiny compared to River West. But inspiration for the effort remains familiar.

"The nature of the neighborhood's intermittent and conflicting development pattern has inhibited the neighborhood's growth and vitality," said the plan, adopted in January 1998.

This effort went nowhere, as well. Need proof? River West is the place with a firehouse in an honest-to-goodness house.

Land-use planning is very important to a successful city.

Council President Oliver Baines

River West's development ebbed and flowed according to broader economic trends. City Hall's 2025 general plan, adopted in 2002 after Solis had left for the private sector, recognized yet again the need for planning.

For the most part, though, nothing stopped the advance of residential "arms" and the creation of rural "fjords." Solis says the jigsaw-puzzle nature of the area's city boundaries means lots of "chopped-up parcels. It's very difficult to assemble land for development."

## **So much potential**

River West has its attractions.

Developers know the value of Central Unified School District to home-buying parents. That's why owners of the failed Running Horse housing project in southwest Fresno insisted 10 years ago that their huge project, originally straddling Fresno Unified and Central Unified, be moved entirely into the latter district.

Gateway Ice Center, on Marks Avenue north of Clinton, is in River West. So, too, is Island Waterpark on Barstow Avenue next to 99.

The opening of the much-anticipated Universally Accessible Park (also called Inspiration Park), on Gettysburg Avenue near Polk Avenue, isn't far away.

But whether you're heading to River West to live or enjoy a good time, Solis says, "you've got to get there."

Highway 99, the railroad and Fresno's uneven growth along the east side of this corridor form a wall of sorts.

For example, Shaw is a major street to the east of 99 and little more than a country lane on the west side. Only River West's brave or foolhardy use Herndon Avenue as a path across 99. Between Shaw and Herndon, River West residents have no other cross-highway option. They feel like the traveling salesman who, after asking a farmer for

directions, was told, “You can’t get there from here.”

River West residents need more of the neighborhood retail that proper planning would accelerate, Brandau says. The residents also need better paths to the rest of Fresno, he says.

For these reasons, Brandau says, government officials should fast-track the construction of Veterans Boulevard. He’s not being sarcastic.

## **Promises, promises, promises**

Veterans Boulevard has been on the drawing board under that name since the mid-1980s. Small pieces have been built, some already getting traffic. Right-of-way has been purchased. Environmental studies are done. Plans for overpasses to span the 99/railroad corridor are moving through the system.

But the boulevard’s fundamental purpose — connect with style and convenience Fresno proper and River West — remains but a promise.

Public Works Director Scott Mozier says Veterans Boulevard could be shovel-ready next year. Shovel-ready isn’t the same as fully funded. The cost of the boulevard’s phase one, Herndon to Shaw, figures to be about \$130 million. Securing every cent will depend on the vagaries of government sentiment. Full-scale construction might start in 2020 or 2021, Mozier says.

The bullet train could be zipping past River West at 220 mph while residents struggle to get an ice cream cone in a timely fashion.

Some 18 months later, he adds, motorists could be zipping along Veterans Boulevard at 50 mph.

What will it look like? Mozier points to a [10-minute Veterans Boulevard video](#) produced by the Fresno Council of Governments that visualizes the miracle. What is perhaps most amazing isn’t the artist’s trucks and SUVs moving effortlessly between Herndon and Shaw but the thought of what happens far into the 21st century when an expanded Veterans Boulevard reaches all the way to 180 in southwest Fresno.

At that point, metropolitan Fresno would be encircled — Herndon, Veterans, 180, Highway 168 — by modern thoroughfares.

## **The rich get richer**

This raises the last factor in Brandau’s mission. He didn’t focus on Granville Homes in his April 30 speech to the council, but the Assemi family’s powerful and wealthy empire almost certainly will benefit when order comes to River West.

Westlake had been on Granville’s to-do list for years. The project was to be more than 400 acres of master-planned homes, green space and retail in a rectangle bounded by Gettysburg, Garfield, Shields and Grantland avenues. Though not yet in the city, this site is clearly part of River West’s area of influence.

But Granville Homes President Darius Assemi surprised everyone last fall when he said an uncertain market was forcing him to postpone the project for as much as a decade. Almond trees would take the place of front yards.

\$3,900

Contribution made on Oct. 4, 2012 from Granville Homes President Darius Assemi to Steve Brandau’s City Council campaign

At the same time, Assemi left the Westlake door ajar, saying the project would wait until “it’s financially feasible and

the right components are in place.”

Granville isn't the only developer to have built in River West. It's not the only developer with plans for more construction.

Still, Granville game-changing dominoes are in place, just waiting for the first one to tip: River West specific plan gets done; Veterans Boulevard from Herndon to Shaw is built; Westlake's almonds give way to houses; Veterans Boulevard gets extended to 180; Granville's vow to turn the old Running Horse site (now called Mission Ranch, also covered with almond trees) into a master-planned community suddenly makes sense.

Granville already is a major player in downtown Fresno, north Fresno, east-central Fresno and southeast Fresno. When the last River West domino falls, it won't be only a multi-lane ribbon of asphalt and concrete that encircles the city.

Brandau is more than halfway through his first term in office. His 2012 council campaign was boosted by more than \$10,000 from various Granville connections.

The contributions were important, Brandau says, but they don't explain his River West concern.

“My concern comes from talking to people on their doorsteps during the campaign. That's where I first heard of the problems west of 99. I made a promise to the people: If I got elected, I would do my best to do something about it.”

Brandau says he and Granville in many ways think alike on planning.

“There's a connection there,” Brandau says. “They appreciate what I do. I think they do fantastic work in the city, as do our other developers. Beyond that, there is no connection.”

Assemi says it's way too early to talk about turning the trees of Westlake and Mission Ranch into houses. He says Brandau is “driven” to help River West residents.

“We connected with Steve because he's a breath of fresh air,” Assemi says. “He wants to do the right thing.”

Nothing gets Fresno's political pot boiling like a public rapport between City Hall and a developer.

Veronica Garibay, co-director of Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability, says City Hall can't let River West hoopla sap the new general plan's commitment to inner-city Fresnans.

“Our concern is this: How is the city going to make sure existing communities get their fair share?” Garibay says.

First things first, and that means the River West Specific Plan. Jennifer Clark, head of the city's Development and Resource Management Department, says she is ready to begin work when the next budget takes effect July 1. Money and community participation are vital, she says.

So, too, is patience.

Says Clark: “It doesn't happen overnight.”

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If you go

Fresno City Budget hearings begin at 8:30 a.m. Monday in the City Council Chambers at City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.