



Final Urban Area General Plan

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City of Modesto Urban Area General Plan

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Chapter I

Introduction to the Modesto Urban Area General Plan

The City of Modesto, California, (City) is located in Stanislaus County, in the northern section of the San Joaquin Valley. The Central Pacific Railroad founded the original Modesto community in 1870, on a site near the Tuolumne River. Incorporated in 1884, the City of Modesto is the county seat of Stanislaus County (County), and has traditionally served as the regional center for the County and the surrounding area.

A. WHAT IS THE GENERAL PLAN?

In California, the General Plan has often been described as a “blueprint for future growth” or a “constitution for future development” of a community. The General Plan for Modesto is best described as “a set of instructions on how to build a city.” This concept is further underscored by our General Plan’s full name, the City of Modesto Urban Area General Plan.

From a practical matter, the General Plan is a set of policies, charts, maps, and other graphics which collectively respond to California State Law requirements (Section 65300 et. seq. of the Government Code), structured to meet local conditions. The Modesto Urban Area General Plan is intended to guide the physical development of the Modesto community to 2025.

B. WHAT IS THE VISION OF THIS COMMUNITY?

Whether the General Plan is a blueprint, a constitution, or a set of instructions, it must be focused on a community vision. Past community accomplishments are described here, as well as the future vision which guides this General Plan.

1. Past Community Accomplishments

During the 1950s, a joint effort with staff from the County and surrounding cities produced the City’s first General Plan. A bold vision of open space along the two natural waterways was part of this General Plan. This vision was implemented in the 1960s and 1970s with the establishment of the Tuolumne River Regional Park through a County-Ceres-Modesto Joint Powers Authority and Dry Creek Area Park in Modesto. This vision also included a system of expressways. Briggsmore Avenue was the first expressway to be implemented.

During the 1980s, the vision was expanded to include the Modesto Centre Plaza–Red Lion project which signified a new investment in downtown and a new vision of new development through Specific Plans. More recently, the City has constructed a new City Hall and Fire Station 11, the Gallo Center for the Arts has opened in downtown, the City is acquiring land for the Tuolumne River Regional Park and the Virginia Avenue Corridor, and the City has built the Peggy Mensinger Trail, John Thurman Field, and the Kansas-Needham overcrossing.

Modesto adopted its first General Plan in 1959. Two comprehensive updates of the General Plan occurred: 1973–1974 and 1995. Since then, several individual elements of the General Plan have been updated, the most recent being the Housing Element in 2004. In addition, the City of Modesto Master Redevelopment Plan was adopted in October 2007.

2. Visions for the Future

The Modesto Urban Area General Plan provides an opportunity to address the community’s vision of the future.

a. Overall Mission Statement

The following Mission Statement, originally developed by the General Plan Citizens’ Steering Committee, remains the most appropriate statement to guide the overall future development of the Modesto community:

The Modesto Urban Area General Plan addresses the collective challenges of the future. The Urban Area General Plan presents a blueprint for the preservation of Modesto’s “quality of life” while providing direction for the growth of business and industry to meet the needs of the future generations in the Modesto community.

b. Employment Opportunities

A guiding force in this General Plan is economic development to provide jobs to match population growth. This General Plan provides for a total of 5,000 acres of new Business Park and 1,000 acres of Commercial land uses. Through these new land uses, along with miscellaneous support commercial land uses in future residential areas, opportunities for land use supporting more than 144,000 new jobs are created in this General Plan.

c. More Comprehensive Planning

As Modesto grows, there will be a need for comprehensive planning approaches to deal with increasingly complex land development and public facilities and service issues. Chapter II of this Plan presents a strategy to recognize the urbanized community, as it exists in 2007. The land use pattern in this area, termed the Baseline Developed Area, is not expected to change substantially. Future growth would occur in accordance with existing City zoning designations and with other City policies in existence as of the Base Year (2007) of this General Plan. This strategy allows the City to concentrate its future growth in the Redevelopment Master Plan Area and in the Planned Urbanizing Area. The Redevelopment Master Plan Area encompasses the City’s downtown core and will allow higher density, mixed-use development in order to create a balanced and vibrant downtown core and active neighborhood centers. The Redevelopment Master Plan is designed to serve as the Redevelopment Agency’s blueprint for redevelopment. The purpose of that plan is to identify and prioritize land use and economic development goals, and present recommendations for improvements that will contribute to a visually appealing public realm; efficient automobile, bicycle, and pedestrian circulation; and adequate infrastructure to serve the planned redevelopment.

The Planned Urbanizing Area forms the outer perimeter of the General Plan area. Future projects in the Planned Urbanizing Area are guided by focused policies in the form of Comprehensive Planning Districts. Development sequencing in the Planned Urbanizing Area is guided by the policies of this General Plan and two voter initiatives, Measures A and M.

d. Defining Modesto’s Character

Modesto’s urban identity will be defined by the floodplains of the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers to provide two natural greenbelts. The City will also preserve open space, farmland, scenic vistas, historic buildings, and sensitive environmental areas, where feasible. In the very long-term future, the San Joaquin River floodplain and anticipated wetlands preserves will separate urban expansions of the Freeway 99 corridor from those of the Freeway I-5 corridor.

Redirection of continued urban growth away from the Valley floor outside of Modesto’s General Plan area will require regional or state-wide leadership and policy.

e. Reducing Automobile Traffic Impacts

This General Plan envisions an expanded street system, supplemented by both an enhanced transit system and non-motorized transportation system, to reduce traffic congestion. The proposed transit system includes an expanded bus system with reduced headways, and a light rail system. An expressway system will provide a circumferential routing about the urban area to facilitate vehicular movement. The non-motorized transportation system will link areas of the city with trails, bike lanes, and bike routes in an interconnected grid.

f. Maintaining Older Neighborhoods and Upgrading Unsafe Neighborhoods

Older neighborhoods will not be abandoned in Modesto. The aesthetic appeal and character of existing neighborhoods should be reinforced. Neighborhoods will continue to have sustained public service and investment. Examples have been the investment of Modesto schools’ bond funding of the 1980s into a few new schools and upgrade of most;; City investment of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds into target area neighborhoods for housing rehabilitation, investment of City funds in capital projects in older as well as newer neighborhoods, and community-oriented policing to identify and solve the root of problems.

g. Integrating New Neighborhoods into the Urban Pattern

“Villages” integrated into the rest of the City, with a strong pedestrian orientation, nearby shopping, and employment, are a departure from past, prototypical neighborhoods and hold the promise of unique differences, one village to another. A development community of small-scale builders provides a variety of housing types in each neighborhood, making possible a diversity of residents that adds to neighborhood vitality. The moderate pace of staged growth helps out as well. Both factors help to avoid the large-scale development of uniform housing geared to one market segment.

h. Agricultural Land Preservation

Agriculture is big business in Stanislaus County. As the leading industry in the County, 2002 gross income from agriculture exceeded \$1.2 billion. The Agricultural Element in Stanislaus County's General Plan projects that with the multipliers of food processing, marketing, and related services, agriculture contributed over \$3.25 billion to the local economy. Stanislaus County ranks seventh in the nation based on the market value of agricultural products sold.

However, agricultural land values are no match for urban development land values. With the continuing population growth pressures of the state destined to be directed to the Central Valley, the past visions of distinct city service centers surrounded by an agricultural hinterland are being threatened by a vision of the San Fernando and Santa Clara Valleys with a carpet of urbanization on the Valley floor from the west-side hills to the Sierra foothills.

i. Environmental Concerns

The loss of some agricultural land is a direct consequence of any urbanization. This General Plan, like the one preceding it, promotes residential development at higher densities to avoid low-density sprawl and promotes staged urban growth so that the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses is focused to a few villages, not spread broadly around the City's urban perimeter.

Traffic congestion remains an environmental concern. Paying for major transportation improvements, including expressway and transit systems at time of need, and new or improved freeway systems continues to be a concern.

Municipal water, stormwater, and wastewater are key environmental issues for the City. Groundwater levels in the City have declined from historic levels, particularly in the downtown area, due to increasing urban uses. As a result, the City will need to continue to protect and conserve water resources while pursuing additional water supplies. As the City continues to develop, and the area of impervious surface within the City increases, the volume of stormwater runoff will increase, requiring new and expanded conveyance and storage facilities. In addition, increasingly restrictive requirements under the Clean Water Act will necessitate additional treatment of stormwater prior to discharge to local waterways, which include Modesto Irrigation District (MID) canals, Dry Creek, and the Tuolumne River. Similarly, increased development will lead to larger volumes of wastewater, requiring new or expanded conveyance and treatment facilities. Stormwater and wastewater issues intersect with the City's current sanitary sewer overflow system, under which stormwater flows exceeding the capacity of conveyance facilities are redirected to the sanitary sewer system, and are subsequently treated at the City's wastewater treatment plant (WWTTP). The volume and the quality of stormwater reaching the WWTTP tax the capacity of the sanitary sewer system.

Air quality is the most difficult of concerns, because of the inability of the eight-county San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District to attain federal standards for various emissions. The City and other agencies within the Air Pollution Control District face challenging targets for reduction of emissions and challenging Transportation Control Measure goals.

C. WHAT ARE THE OVERALL GOALS BEHIND THIS COMMUNITY VISION?

The following goals, phrased as Project Objectives, were instrumental in developing the policies presented in the Modesto Urban Area General Plan. These objectives were derived from concepts initially developed by the General Plan Steering Committee, a citizens group appointed by the City Council in 1992 to oversee the General Plan Rewrite effort.

1. Future urban expansion for residential uses should be designed in the form of mixed-use developments, similar to Village One. These developments should contain housing, shops, schools, parks, and civic facilities essential to the daily life of the residents. This development should implement land use practices that assist in meeting state and federal environmental regulations.
2. Transportation and Circulation systems that adequately provide for intra-city and regional transportation needs should be provided. Alternatives to the drive-alone auto mode, such as light rail, mass transit, ride sharing, bicycling, trail systems, and telecommuting should be encouraged to reduce traffic congestion and enhance air quality. The City's transportation planning should be coordinated with regional transportation planning efforts, wherever possible.
3. The ultimate population projected to occur within the Modesto General Plan boundary is 428,300, which represents the reasonable estimated population within the General Plan boundary, given existing conditions. This population level is not expected to be reached during the General Plan's time horizon. Rather, it would be reached at some undetermined time after 2025/2030. This General Plan presents a vision of future development of the community and a planning horizon through 2025. Existing infrastructure plans for the City contain a projection year of 2030 for circulation and other infrastructure related purposes.
4. Modesto should contain an ample supply of specialized open space, strategically located and well designed, in order to promote frequent use from the community.
5. The natural river corridors in Modesto should be preserved for recreational and open space opportunities.
6. The General Plan should attempt to minimize the loss of agricultural land outside the planning area by having future development be relatively compact and of reasonably high density. Potential conflicts between agricultural and urban uses should be resolved through appropriate land use measures.

D. WHAT ARE THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOALS OF THIS COMMUNITY VISION?

In order to provide more employment opportunities for the residents of Modesto, the local and regional economy must grow and become more diversified. Accordingly, the following Economic Development Goals are adopted to attract new private investment, to encourage existing businesses to grow, and to facilitate the creation of new jobs.

1. Development in Modesto should strive for a local jobs/housing balance by facilitating business growth and encouraging the economic revitalization of the downtown. Adequate land, strategically located to facilitate the expansion of Modesto's economic base, should be provided

for the employment opportunities of Modesto residents. These opportunities should be focused on the types of businesses that will thrive in the 21st century.

2. The Modesto Redevelopment Area will be the focal point of community life and the social, cultural, business, governmental, and entertainment center of the northern San Joaquin Valley. The City shall work to preserve and revitalize the City's downtown core as an identifiable center for all of Stanislaus County.
3. Leverage private and public funds to enhance revitalization throughout the City, particularly in the redevelopment project areas.
4. The Modesto community should contain a diversity of housing types to enable citizens from a wide range of economic levels and age groups to live within its boundaries.
5. Community growth should be managed so that the quality of life is enhanced without imposing significant fiscal burdens on the existing community. To the extent provided by law, the costs of public infrastructure required to serve new development should be financed from revenue attributable to that development. Infrastructure should be provided in advance of or concurrent with development. There may be instances in which it would be appropriate to invest community-wide resources in public infrastructure, when such investment would lead to a significant increase in jobs or other benefits to the community.
6. Utility facilities for Modesto's expansion should have financing programs based on sufficient user fees and service charges that allow for those utility services to be self-supporting.
7. The General Plan is accompanied by a Master Environmental Impact Report (MEIR), which addresses the cumulative impacts of projected development as well as alternative development scenarios. The MEIR is a broad document addressing community-wide environmental effects. The MEIR also establishes a foundation for subsequent tiered environmental review. In this way, project-level environmental review can be streamlined, as allowed by state law.
8. The General Plan Master EIR does not attempt to explore impacts projected to occur after 2025. The City considers any such impacts beyond 2025 to be "too speculative for evaluation" in the Master EIR (Section 15145, CEQA Guidelines).

E. WHAT ARE THE HOUSING GOALS OF THIS COMMUNITY VISION?

State law requires that the City of Modesto's Housing Element contain an analysis of existing and projected housing needs, as well as policies and programs to meet those demands. State law also mandates that the City evaluate its Housing Element every five years to determine its effectiveness in achieving its housing goals and objectives, and to adopt an updated Housing Element, which reflects the results of this evaluation. The City of Modesto's adopted Housing Element is bound separately and is on file with the City's Community and Economic Development Department.

F. READER'S GUIDE TO THIS GENERAL PLAN

Each of the General Plan element's data, analyses, goals, policies, and implementation programs must be consistent with and complement one another. Since the Modesto Urban Area General Plan is "a set

of instructions on how to build the City,” the format of this document is very important. Briefly stated, the “instructions” are presented as chapters, as follows:

- Chapter I, *Introduction*, provides the introduction to these instructions.
- Chapter II, *Community Growth Strategy*, contains policies and a diagram to help define the quality, quantity, and direction of future urban growth.
- Chapter III, *Community Development Policies*, contains the “instructions” for building the actual physical components of the City in a manner consistent with Chapter II.
- Chapter IV, *Housing*, adds “affordable housing” policy requirements to the physical community developed through Chapter III.
- Chapter V, *Community Services and Facilities*, describes the community services and infrastructure needed to support the physical community developed through Chapter III.
- Chapter VI, *Public Safety Issues*, presents policies required by state law to consider certain safety issues such as landslides, flooding, and emergency evacuation rates.
- Chapter VII, *Environmental Resources and Open Space*, presents the local open space plan and physical and environmental resources in the community.
- Chapter VIII, *General Plan Implementation*, presents a variety of tools available to the City to help build the physical City envisioned in Chapter III.
- Appendix A, *The 2005–2009 Consolidated Plan, Executive Summary*, directs the City’s investment of federal funds to meet priority needs for housing, public services, and community and economic development.
- Appendix B, *Amendments to the General Plan*, lists amendments to the 1995 General Plan.

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