

Leaders from Fresno, Madera counties vow to cool legal fights about growth

By Kurtis Alexander, staff writer

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Leaders from across Fresno and Madera counties pledged Tuesday to cool their long-standing feud over how the region should grow, but only after hours of debate showed that a détente won't come easy.

Billed as a regional growth summit, Tuesday's crowded meeting in a downtown Fresno government office was the first time representatives from the two counties and the city of Fresno gathered under the same roof to discuss development since a raft of lawsuits divided the parties.

County leaders, who organized the event, pressed Fresno to answer for litigation that it filed against the counties for approving thousands of new homes and businesses north of town.

"Every time we advocate growth, we get lawsuits thrown in front of us," said Madera County Supervisor Max Rodriguez. "We want to grow up. You want to grow up. We don't want to be suing each other."

While the counties don't want the city meddling in their affairs, the city doesn't want the fields and foothills outside its borders drowned in sprawl.

Already, the San Joaquin Valley has a reputation for bad planning. Massive subdivisions have displaced farmland, downtowns are marked by blight and local commutes contribute to some of the nation's worst air pollution.

The city is not free of blame for the problems, and in fact, pursued many of the growth strategies that it's now condemning.

Expectations that the region will remain one of California's fastest-growing areas underscores a need for better planning, officials agreed. Even the governor's office has offered to extend a hand.

"When Sacramento wants to step in, it behooves us to take a look in the mirror," said Fresno County Supervisor Andreas Borgeas, a former Fresno City Council member. "I can't think of a time that (our) relations have been worse."

An envoy from the state Strategic Growth Council attended Tuesday, but contributed little to the discussion.

More than 100 onlookers packed the meeting hall of the Fresno Council of Governments.

The summit was dominated by the meeting's sponsors, Fresno and Madera counties. Planners from the two jurisdictions shared visions for up to 100,000 new residents living along the San Joaquin River and in the hills near Friant.

Speakers addressed the need for new roads, adequately funded infrastructure and river preservation.

"Sprawl is not a matter of where you develop. It's a matter of how it occurs," said Madera County Planning Director Norman Allinder, who committed to pairing housing with jobs to prevent long commutes and the associated problems of traffic and bad air quality.

Fresno city leaders, who attended the summit as guests, want to see regional development steered within their borders, particularly to their long-neglected downtown.

The city is suing the counties over the proposed 5,200-home Tesoro Viejo development in Madera County and 2,500-home Friant Ranch in Fresno County. City attorneys say such "leapfrog" development will add unwanted traffic, air pollution and infrastructure demands to the region.

Madera County has recently retaliated with a suit of its own against Fresno. It's suing for the proposed El Paseo business and entertainment complex on Herndon Avenue, alleging the project will bring many of the same problems that the city fears will come with Tesoro Viejo.

The three hours of county discussion Tuesday left little time for the city to engage at the forum. But City Manager Mark Scott spoke briefly, responding to criticism over city litigation and committing to meet with the counties to discuss settling the lawsuits.

"There's no excuse for us not sitting down together to resolve these things," Scott said.

The counties agreed to have representatives meet with the city to take up the litigation.

Mike McCoy, who represented Gov. Jerry Brown's administration and serves as executive director of the Strategic Growth Council, said after the summit that there are ways the parties can settle their differences, at least over the long term. He said the state could lend a hand.

State-mandated housing requirements, for example, could be changed so that counties wouldn't be required to grow in places where it isn't desirable and tax-sharing agreements could be put in place to prevent counties from growing solely for more tax revenue, McCoy explained.

"We have to recognize the needs counties have," he said. "But the state does have a responsibility to represent the broad will of the community."

McCoy said that neither he nor other state officials intend to tell the local governments what to do. The state is merely available for assistance, he said.

Leaders from the two counties have so far spurned offers by the governor's office to get involved.

"I believe in local control, and it's the only way to preserve property rights," Madera County Supervisor David Rogers said. "It's the linchpin of our freedom."

Fresno County Supervisor Henry Perea, who initiated the growth summit, said Tuesday's dialogue marked a good initial effort at regional planning. He said it was the first time since 2001 that the counties had met to discuss the important topic of growth.

"Our goal at the end of the day is to start talking about next steps," he said. "If we don't talk, if we don't work together, we're going to fail our communities."

A Roundabout Way

Traffic calming devices touted as air quality pluses

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

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Bulb-outs - the much maligned landscaping devices that jut out into street parking areas in downtown Manteca - are going to become a staple of new neighborhoods.

And it's because state air quality gurus believe aggressively deployed traffic calming devices that also includes roundabouts can reduce greenhouse emissions by 0.25 to 1 percent. Traffic calming devices are seen as a way to increase walking and bicycling. In the case of roundabouts, they also reduce vehicle stop and go movements at intersections that would traditionally have had stop signs installed. Acceleration and idling causes a surge in vehicle emissions.

Bulb-outs and roundabouts are part of an arsenal of design tools for new development the city hopes will allow it to meet emissions reductions mandated by Assembly Bill 32 known as The Global Warming Solutions Act signed into law in 2006. Manteca has to find ways to impose development policies and other strategies that will reduce projected carbon dioxide emissions based on growth, current pollution levels and state-imposed changes in 2020 by an additional 12,014 metric tons a year.

The administrative draft of Manteca's climate action plan also points to making lanes narrower than the current 12-foot standard for streets to slow traffic, make it easier for pedestrians to cross streets and improve bicycling comfort. The only exception would be on streets that have other

safety issues such as truck routes. In such cases, the narrower lane design would not apply to outside lanes where trucks travel.

Narrower travel lanes - especially in residential developments - would help reduce the cost of infrastructure and long-term maintenance by cutting back on the expanse of asphalt. Theoretically, it could also reduce emissions as the construction process also is being forced to comply with greenhouse gas reduction. The less street pavement means fewer emissions created through the mining and transport of materials and mixing of asphalt as well as the use of equipment to construct streets. All of that activity figured into the 408,869 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents the state said the Manteca community as a whole generated in 2010.

Besides bulb-outs at appropriate intersections in new neighborhoods to reduce crossing distances and calm traffic, the city will start requiring marked mid-block crossings near schools, parks and "other neighborhood attractions". The mid-block crossing could include a landscaped median refuge island or a raised or textured sidewalk. In some cases, signals may be required depending on traffic volume.

As for those downtown bulb-outs, the climate action plan calls for more of them along Main Street, Yosemite Avenue and other high use areas. But they wouldn't be as much for landscaping purposes as most existing bulb outs are downtown. Instead, they would be more like the ones on the north side of West Yosemite Avenue at Maple Avenue where the bulb-outs reduce the street crossing distance for pedestrians.

Also to encourage people to get out of their cars for shorter trips, the plan calls for wider sidewalks where possible, buffers between sidewalks and vehicle travel lanes, providing benches, and allow for cafe seating.