

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPACT GROWTH

Barriers to Compact Growth

A number of factors contribute to low density development patterns of three homes per acre, or less, that are often described as urban sprawl. Some of these factors, such as low prices for rural land, market preferences for large lots, and regional economic health are difficult, if not impossible, to influence. However, several other factors create institutional barriers to compact growth that make even slight increases in density difficult even if developers feel that there is a market for compact development patterns.

Land use designations in general plans and minimum lot size requirements in zoning ordinances create a floor on density that prevents the construction of many innovative types of housing. For example, the maximum density that can be achieved with a strict application of the development standards within the R-1-6 zone district (single-family residential - 6,000 square foot minimum lot area) in the City of Fresno is 5.0 homes per acre and the typical density of subdivisions built within this district varies between 3.0 and 4.5 homes per acre.

Examples of higher density single family home development in Fresno County are the exception rather than the rule and often have required a complicated approval process and a number of

variances from the zoning ordinance. Most developers would rather follow the ordinance in order to win quick approval for their projects than utilize the expensive and unreliable variance and general plan amendment process. Nevertheless, several projects have been completed within the City of Fresno that provide high quality single family detached homes at densities of 6.0 to 7.5 units per acre.

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One of the strongest barriers to compact growth has been the natural resistance to change from neighboring residents and lack of political will by local elected officials. Citizens often react to projects that propose higher density with fear that is driven by the myth that

density creates crime, congestion, and will reduce their property values. When these projects come up for approval local leaders are faced with an angry mob who may not understand the key role that these projects play in building livable and economically viable communities. A common vision for community growth must be agreed upon before these projects come up for approval and local leaders must review and approve projects based upon that vision.

Strategies for Achieving Compact Growth

Changing the pattern of growth in our communities cannot be achieved by merely

stating the desire for compact growth in general goals and principles. A number of specific actions must be taken in order to achieve compact growth. The Growth Alternatives Alliance has agreed on the following implementation strategies for achieving compact growth and recommends that these strategies be incorporated into the general plans and planning procedures within each of the communities in Fresno County. General and specific plans should no longer contain provisions that limit compact growth options.

Residential Neighborhoods

The emphasis of planning should focus on the residential neighborhood on a scale that supports a community of 10,000 to 15,000 people. Under this planning framework, small cities may be considered a single neighborhood while larger cities would plan to integrate a number of neighborhood units into a cohesive urban center. Within residential neighborhoods, the objective should be to create a variety of housing types, lot sizes and lot configurations. All neighborhoods should contain a mix of single and multiple family housing as well as neighborhood commercial centers, offices, school sites and other urban services.

1. The land use element of a general plan should only identify the mix of land uses and a broad range of allowable densities for future development. When development of an area is imminent, specific plans or community plans should be prepared to specify the pattern, location, and density of land uses.

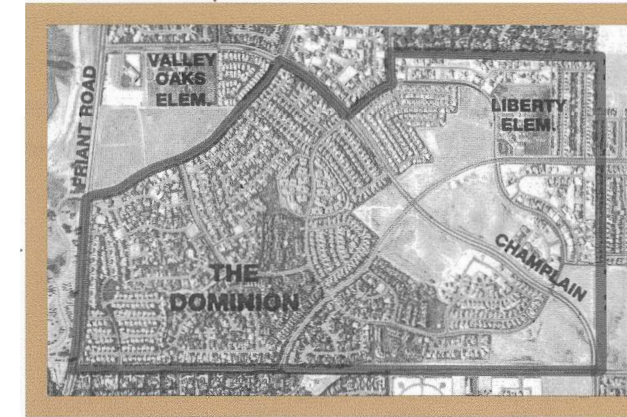
Assigning specific land use designations in the

land use elements of general plans creates a rigid framework upon which development projects are built that prevent the creation of cohesive communities or the ability to change land use patterns in the future. Rather than designating specific parcels of land for commercial development or assigning arbitrary land use densities, the land use element should only outline broad goals regarding the amount of land to be developed to various use categories and the overall density of people to be accommodated.

As development of a particular area becomes imminent a community plan should be developed that represents current trends and preferences while meeting the overall density and land use objectives. In larger cities, an appropriate scale for a community planning effort might encompass an area of 500-700 acres that will accommodate a population of 10,000 -15,000 people. In smaller cities, a planning scale of 160 acres may be more appropriate.

2. Modify design review procedures to create a process that meets planning goals and complements the community vision rather than focusing strictly on rigid numerical standards.

While design standards and criteria are important, they should not be applied so rigorously that they drive the planning process. Instead, the planning and public works staff should be provided with incentives and political



Planned communities such as the Dominion in Fresno provide a variety of housing choices and centralized urban services.