

Densities increase in southeast Fresno plan

Officials say change is needed to save farmland, cut smog, aid mass transit.

By Russell Clemings
 The Fresno Bee

Whether Fresno-area home buyers are willing to live a lot closer to their neighbors is the big question about a new master plan for 14 square miles on the city's southeastern edge.

If you go

- **What:** Public discussion of Southeast Growth Area plan alternatives
- **When:** 6-9 p.m. tonight
- **Where:** New Exhibit Hall, Fresno Convention Center, M and Kern streets

In a metropolitan area where people now live in homes spaced four, five or six to the acre, the Southeast Growth Area plan could place them in 10 homes per acre on average, and more than 20 per acre in some places.

City planners say the high densities are needed to preserve farmland, reduce driving-related air pollution, and support planned mass transit improvements. Moreover, says Development Director Nick Yovino, the city hopes to set an example for smaller cities that are facing the same issues.

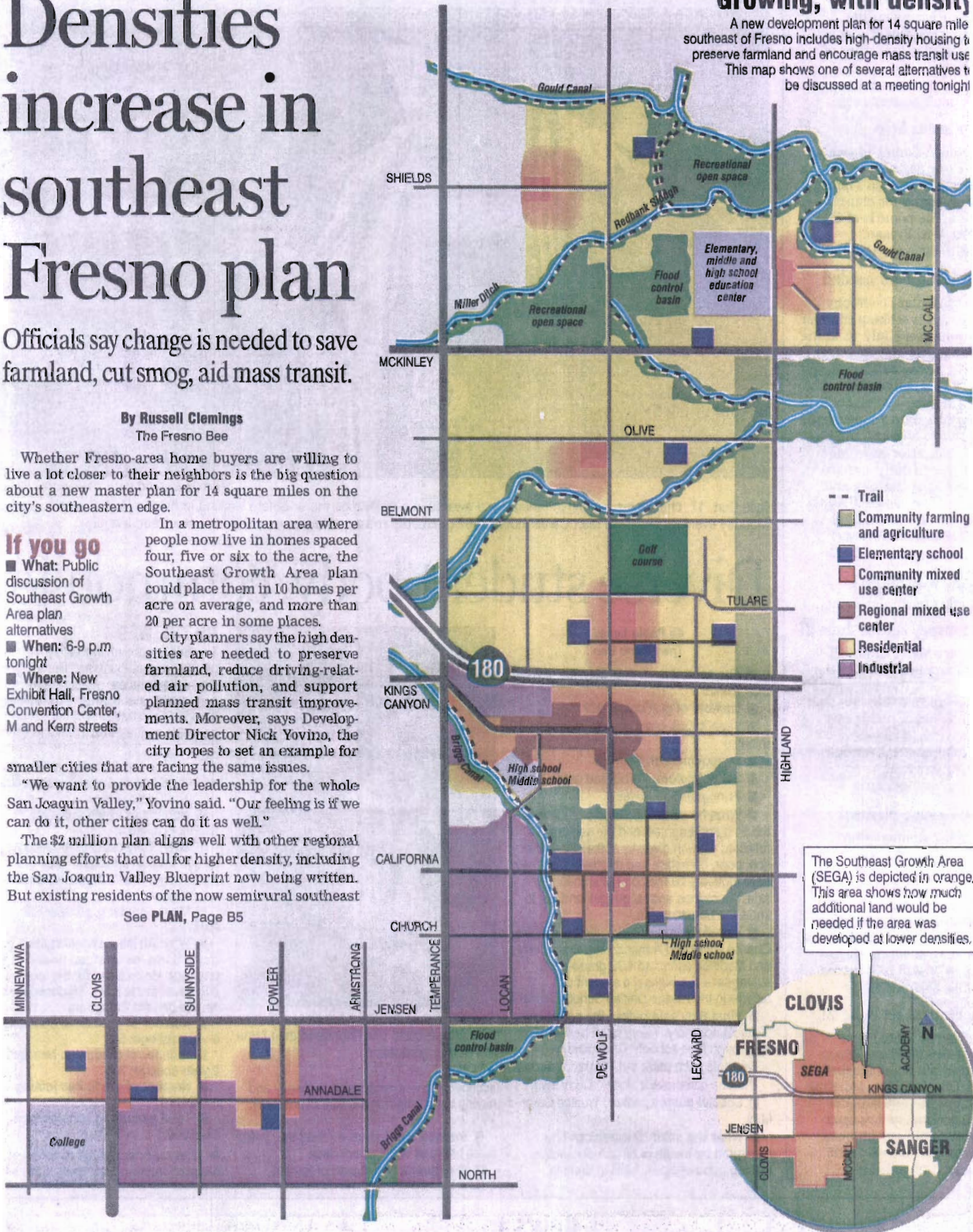
"We want to provide the leadership for the whole San Joaquin Valley," Yovino said. "Our feeling is if we can do it, other cities can do it as well."

The \$2 million plan aligns well with other regional planning efforts that call for higher density, including the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint now being written. But existing residents of the now semirural southeast

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Growing, with density

A new development plan for 14 square mile southeast of Fresno includes high-density housing to preserve farmland and encourage mass transit use. This map shows one of several alternatives to be discussed at a meeting tonight.



Source: Fresno Development Department and Cathorpe Associates

Plan: Early versions try to head off foes

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area are watching the new plan carefully. And by Yovino's own account, builders remain skeptical.

The Southeast Growth Area covers about 14 square miles in two large blocks. One block is generally bounded by Temperance, Jensen and Highland avenues and the Gould Canal on the north. The other, farther south, is bounded by Temperance, Jensen, North and Minnewawa avenues.

Some 3,000 people live in those areas. By 2050, that number is predicted to be 120,000. At typical current density levels, housing that many people could require almost 30 square miles, and Fresno might sprawl its way into merging with Sanger.

"The reality is there are going to be a lot of people moving into this area," said Richard Simonian, chairman of an advisory committee for the new plan.

Early versions of the plan will get their first public review tonight at the Fresno Convention Center. If anything resembling them is endorsed by the City Council in a vote planned for next spring, those throngs of new residents will live in neighborhoods that the city's current residents wouldn't recognize.

Several versions of the plan feature a "regional center" — a second downtown, in essence — centered on DeWolf Avenue between Highway 180 and Butler Avenue. Multistory buildings, with apartments or condominiums upstairs and stores on the ground level, would line the regional center's narrow streets. At its center would be a transit station.

A bus rapid transit line, fashioned after light rail but using special buses instead of trains, would speed commuters from that station to downtown Fresno, stopping every mile. Within the regional center and seven other community centers, walking would be the pri-

mary means of transport.

The densities and mass transit are intertwined, said Yovino's chief assistant, Keith Bergthold.

"To have mass transit work," Bergthold said, "you need about 20 units per acre for a quarter-mile around those [transit] stations. You want to have those higher densities, so a lot of people live very close to those stations and can use them."

Reaction to the plan is still muted as residents and others wait to see the details. Some in the area — such as Joe Castiglione, who lives on 165 acres just south of Belmont Country Club, and Eddie Hernandez, who lives on a farm on Temperance north of California Avenue — say they are preparing to accommodate growth.

"I think the plan's going to work all right," Castiglione said, although he admits to being "a little bit concerned, because we like living out here in the country." He said he intends to stay in his house on part of his property and, most likely, sell the rest to a developer.

Hernandez expects to move and sell his land, which he said has been in his family since 1960, for industrial development. A rail line runs along the edge of the property, enhancing its value for that purpose, and one version of the plan designates his land for industry.

Farther north, near Shields and Leonard avenues, retired lawyer and vineyardist Jerry Henry said he supports high density and transit-friendly development, but worries that future planners won't be able to make that vision stick.

"What's to prevent some future City Council from saying that's nothing but a colored piece of paper hanging on the wall?" Henry asked. "I don't think they have any way to enforce what they're doing."

The plan's early versions aim to head off some opposition by preserving the

rural lifestyles of many current residents by setting them off in pockets that will remain low in density. And while local builders have long voiced doubt about being able to sell high-density homes in this market, one leader said that may be changing.

Yovino said he still hears doubts from builders: "This is totally foreign to them." But Michael Prandini, president and chief executive officer of the Building Industry Association of Fresno and Madera Counties, said his members' views are evolving.

"Ten years ago, the builders wouldn't have thought about building on a 4,000- or 5,000-square-foot lot," he said. "Now it's becoming common."

One of Prandini's worries is that the city won't be able to build needed infrastructure — including a new sewage-treatment plant for the area — until many years have passed. Yovino and Bergthold said, however, that the city has retained a consultant to come up with a strategy for that, possibly involving a special district and funded by bonds that would be paid off by the plan area's eventual development.

"The only way to make this plan work is that the major infrastructure has got to be put in ahead of development," Yovino said. "We've never figured out how to finance something like that before."

That's not all that remains to be figured out. Details of bus rapid transit and "walkable" development are still sketchy at best. But if it all works out, Bergthold said, a portion of Fresno by mid-century will be "more mixed and integrated, linking jobs and housing and recreation and services" into a new style of urban development for the San Joaquin Valley.

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