

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MERCED COUNTY

Planning Position – City of Merced

Position in brief: The League of Women Voters of Merced County support sound planning practices to insure an environment beneficial to all life and the social and economic health of the community. The General Plan, following immediate and complete revision should be the basis for all planning decisions. Maximum co-operation between concerned agencies and full citizen participation are essential.

- I. Planning Policy and Implementation
 - A. General Plan
 1. Development
 - a. The Land Use and Circulation elements of the Merced City General Plan need immediate revision.
 - b. A large, standing committee representing the diverse elements of the community should be formed to actively participate in all phases of General Plan development.
 - c. City and county should work together in areas of mutual concern.
 2. Content: The General Plan should include all those elements mandated by California state law, plus a growth management element, a social element, an economic element, an action program establishing priorities for implementing the Plan on an annual basis, and a specific procedure for reviewing and amending the Plan.
 - a. Land Use element
 - (1.) Prime agricultural land in the San Joaquin Valley is a natural resource which should be preserved.
 - (2.) Urban development should be discouraged on floodplains. Use of floodplains for parks, recreation and wildlife preserves and other uses in which flooding is not detrimental should be encouraged as alternatives to dam construction and channelization of streams.
 - (3.) Residential
 - (a.) Residential areas should be attractive, safe and provide for the diverse housing needs of the community. Health and safety hazards, physical deterioration and other blighting influences in residential areas should be prevented or eliminated.

- (b.) Rural residential areas should be available for those who desire less than the full range of urban services. They should be designated in the General Plan and zoned outside the projected service areas of the city. Existing and potential agricultural land should be
- (4.) Commercial
 - (a.) The Central Business District should remain a strong identifiable center for the entire County area.
 - (b.) Additional regional shopping centers are not needed.
 - (c.) Neighborhood shopping centers should be evenly distributed throughout the city and in scale with the area they serve.
- (5.) Industrial areas should provide a range of employment opportunities in firms compatible with the environment.
- (6.) Historical designation should be considered for areas which are of local, state or national significance.
- (7.) Higher densities and better development in areas currently served by sanitary sewer should be encouraged.
- b. Housing – see housing positions
- c. Conservation – see floodplain section of local land use position and positions on air and water quality, solid waste and energy.
- d. Growth element
 - (1.) The City of Merced should complete an urban growth element to supplement their Land Use element.
 - (2.) This study, among other things, should set standards for evaluation of each proposed sewer trunk extension before its final budgeting and construction.
 - (3.) Potential urban growth should be anticipated to insure that growth occurs in an orderly and logical manner, land is utilized efficiently, agricultural operations are not eliminated prematurely and planning efforts between the city and county are complementary.
- e. Economic element should include an economic assessment of the entire General Plan and establish criteria for evaluating economic impact of projects.
- f. Social element should assess the social needs of the community and outline programs to ameliorate those needs. An action program should be established.

- g. Review procedure
 - (1.) All elements of the General Plan, including the action program, should be reviewed annually.
 - (2.) The staff should present a report on implementation of the General Plan during that year to the citizen group involved in formulation of the Plan and to the Planning Commission.
 - (3.) The General Plan review should be held early enough, the exact month to be specified in the Plan, to allow forthcoming recommendations to influence the budget.
- h. Amendment procedure should conform to state law requiring consistency between the General Plan and zoning. Dates amendments will be considered should be specified. For example: "Amendments to the General Plan will be considered on the third Wednesday of March, July and November.

B. General Plan Implementation: The General Plan should be the basis of all zoning and other decisions.

1. Zoning

- a. Merced, even though a charter city, should require zoning consistency with the General Plan.
- b. The zoning ordinance should be updated following General Plan revision.
- c. The zoning ordinance should be reviewed periodically and strongly enforced.
- d. Strip zoning along thoroughfares should not be permitted.

2. Capital Improvements

- a. Priority should be given to those projects which promote the community health, safety and welfare with particular emphasis on equalizing improvement, facilities and services in all sub-standard areas.
- b. A complete capital improvement program including a 5-year projection for setting up funding and priorities with a yearly review should be established.
- c. Special fund(s) should be created by ordinance for high priority capital outlay purposes in order to fulfill the goals of the General Plan at the earliest possible date. This ordinance should be explicit only as to the purpose of the fund and should not include details which might unnecessarily limit actions or plans.

3. Project review
 - a. Guidelines outlining policies and expectations should be made for the benefit of developers and citizens alike.
 - b. As a basis for decision making, a checklist for evaluating projects should include the following factors: local economy, natural environment, public and private transportation, population mix, relationship to entire community, reasonableness & timeliness of project, adequacy of site plan (does it encourage certain kinds of development in conjunction with it), housing and social conditions, aesthetic and cultural values.
 - c. Staff should review each project using the checklist and then present a written report to the planning commission five days before the matter will be considered.
4. An architectural review board should be established to approve design plans for commercial, industrial and multi-family residential projects. It should include at least one architect and possibly a landscape architect and an artist.
5. Subdivision ordinance should be consistent with the General Plan and reviewed as necessary to incorporate changes in the state subdivision Map Act.
6. Specific Plans should be made for areas where detailed planning is essential. Plans for the G Street corridor, the Olive Avenue Corridor and the Downtown Redevelopment area need this attention now.
7. The park system needs a Master Plan to evaluate the needs of the community and to develop a program to meet these needs.

II. Role of the Decision Makers: Commissioners and Council members are entrusted by the people with the physical well-being of their community.

A. The Planning Commission

1. The Planning Commission is responsible for initiating action to carry out the General Plan.
2. Its membership should represent a cross section of the population.
3. A selection process should be developed that is well-defined, well-publicized and openly discussed.
 - a. Persons who frequently must refrain from participating in Commission business because of conflict of interest should not be commissioners.
 - b. Applicants selected should be willing and able to devote sufficient time to commission duties.

4. As a high priority item, funds should be available to train new members and also to provide continuing education.
 - a. Staff should have a training program locally.
 - b. Members should also be able to attend workshops or courses sponsored by universities or professional organizations.
5. Commission and staff should review procedures and decide which
6. Community relations
 - a. Commissioners should solicit input and reaction from the community policy decisions.
 - b. Commissioners should be aware of community attitudes.
 - c. Significant decisions should be made at meetings held in the area most affected. (Council must meet in Council Chambers, but study sessions could be moved into neighborhoods.)
 - d. News media should be utilized fully to explain the ramifications of a pending decision.

B. City Council: Same as Items 4 and 6 for the Planning Commission

III. Planning Process and the Citizen

- A. Information should be uniform, accurate and readily available.
- B. Hand-outs outlining procedures should be available to applicants.
- C. A continual campaign to educate citizens about zoning ordinance regulations should be continued.