The General Plan for Farmersville, California

Farmersville, California, adopted a progressive planning document that emphasizes agriculture preservation while encouraging smart growth.

They are very forward thinking for a small community, and I applaud them for it," says John Miller, the San Joaquin Valley field representative of the American Farmland Trust.

The APA awards jury agreed, and created a special 2004 award for a plan adopted by a small town or rural community. The jury looked approvingly at the plan's provision for higher density and farmland preservation, a word-of-mouth campaign to involve and educate residents, and the resulting advance in community attitudes toward good planning.

Collins & Schoettler Planning Consultants, based in neighboring Visalia, was hired to revise the city's general plan of 1986. After more than two years of preparation, including public workshops, meetings, and discussion, the city council adopted an updated plan in November 2002.

Former Farmersville city manager Graham Mitchell, now city manager in Lemon Grove, California, admits the old plan was out-of-date. It seemed easier and more productive, he says, to start from scratch. Officials created a committee of 25, including two council members and two planning commissioners as well as local developers.

"We wanted feedback from common residents," says Mitchell. "We also wanted to get people ready to be planning commissioners. We tried to create a pool of future members." Consultant Karl Schoettler used slide shows of images from various areas of California. He and his team then let the citizens decide what kind of growth they wanted.

Small town, big future

Farmersville, located in the San Joaquin Valley, is the second smallest city in Tulare County. "We are a very old community. It was for years kind of a stop on the Butterfield stage in the 1800s," says Mayor Paul Boyer. Many of the residents are long-timers, some of them migrant workers who arrived during the 1930s and '40s. More than 70 percent of the population is Hispanic.

General store owner Thomas Brundage named the community "Farmersville" in 1868. It still has many farmers; local crops include walnuts, peaches, plums, nectarines, and grapes. While the population is growing about three percent a year, its economic base is narrow. The school district is the major employer, and the area poverty rate is 22 percent. For the past 10 years Farmersville has had the highest unemployment rate in the county.

But the potential is there. Visalia, seven miles away (pop. 92,000), is booming, and growth is starting to spread. State Highway 198 in Tulare County may soon become an industrial corridor, and as Visalia's industrial park fills up, Farmersville hopes to capture the spillover, Mayor Boyer says. The town has a water well near the highway, and has built new water lines and sewers. Housing is more affordable than in Visalia, Boyer says.

"We saw ourselves in the next 20 years," says former manager Mitchell, and realized that "we had to stop thinking of ourselves as a small town, because developers weren't looking at us like that, and if we kept that way, we'd have some poor development."

Growth and space

The new plan tackles growth and open space conservation and plots a course until 2025. Development controls aim to improve design and produce livable, walkable communities. Multifamily housing (once opposed by residents and members of the city council) is now set close to the street with front porches for individual units and parking at the back. Narrow streets, from 36 to 32 feet wide, are a priority in single-family neighborhoods. New developments also sport street trees, paved crossing lanes, and bulb out sidewalks at intersections.

Citizens "really championed a lot of the pedestrian-friendly concepts in the downtown area," says Mitchell. "For some of those concepts, sometimes there's not a lot of political will. It helps the council members to see that there were residents—voters—who wanted that type of amenity." The two main streets are being upgraded, and medians and bicycle lanes will be added.

Saving the farms

The San Joaquin Valley grows more than 250 commodities and stores water from the Sierra Nevadas. The new plan weighs in against dividing agricultural land into less than 20 acres in order to maintain parcels large enough for profitable farming. A development impact fee is designed to help preserve farmland.

Miller and the farmland trust hope that Farmersville will become an example for other communities in the valley. "Nationally, we are hoping that others will look at it and say, 'Hey, this town did it, we can too,'" says Miller.

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