

Visalia City Council, Planning Commission square off over growth

Joint session aims to grow cooperation between agencies

By Gerald Carroll

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Sat., April 3, 2010

Monday's joint session of the Visalia City Council and Visalia Planning Commission presents an opportunity for the "bosses" to give "subordinates" clear directions on city growth, officials say.

"The [Visalia] City Council is the boss," said Paul Scheibel, planning services manager for Visalia, "and they [Planning Commission] are the subordinates."

Indeed, since the council selects members of the Visalia Planning Commission, that hierarchy would seem to hold true. However, that doesn't mean the Planning Commission should work in a vacuum, said Terese Lane, a member of the commission.

"The council sets policy and the planning commission is supposed to implement it," Lane said, "but sometimes the guidelines we get aren't clear."

Case in point is the explosion over the past two years of development in west Visalia near the Visalia Municipal Airport along Plaza Drive. Spurred on by the construction of a Fresno Pacific University campus in the new Plaza Business Park, area developers are quickly seizing the chance to build hotels, quick-stop stores and gasoline stations on parcels that were supposed to feature only large-scale, campus-like developments.

The "business research park" zoning vision was dashed in late 2007 when the Mangano organization successfully lobbied the Planning Commission — including separate presentations to each of the five commission members — to pass an elaborate developmental plan that included freeway-familiar amenities that did not meet with City Council approval.

At first, the council tried to appeal the Planning Commission's decision — but later relented.

But fears of horrible traffic jams and [increased air pollution](#) in the Plaza Drive corridor have not panned out — mainly because already-financed widening and modernization of the area has already begun to materialize despite the recession, which has also served to slow down the pace of growth.

Hence, Visalia is poised for the economic rebound when it does eventually occur, experts say.

"We're holding our own" through the economic slowdown, said Mike Olmos, assistant manager for Visalia.

"No doubt we're now in a much better position when business expansion returns."

Regional Roundup

Middle school students place in competition

Jennifer Bonnett

Lodi News Sentinel, Fri., April 2, 2010

Students from Morada Middle School recently placed second in a national competition focused on sustainable transportation. The local team was sponsored by the California Department of Transportation, District 10.

The competition was held March 23 and local students competed against six teams.

Morada's team included seventh- and eighth-graders, teacher Maria Mack, and mentors Homer Zarzuela and Pat Robeldo. They are engineers who work for Caltrans and volunteered their team to work with the students.

The project, a sustainable multi-hybrid translink system, would minimize the headway distance between vehicles, increase the volume flow of traffic and [improve air quality by reducing emissions](#), among other things, according to a press release. Students looked at utilizing renewable energy sources such as solar power and fuel cells, and carpools.

The program is designed to increase middle school students' awareness of transportation issues, interest them in careers in transportation, and motivate them to take math and science classes in high school.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sun., April 4, 2010:](#)

Eat locally

There is something that needs to be said about eating locally and its benefits to the Valley. Much of the produce that is sold in the supermarkets is processed and has a number of food additives that change the color and taste of the produce making food appear ripe when it is often picked before it is actually ripe.

The food also arrives at the stores unspoiled so preservatives are added that reduce the vitamin content of the food. Not only is the produce altered, it has to travel hundreds to thousands of miles to reach its final destination in your home. It is shipped in semi-trucks which adds to the [pollution in the Valley](#) which causes health problems, such as asthma, in many of the residents here.

Food bought at a local food market is picked when it is ripe and ready to eat, without the extra additives. Additionally, it doesn't have to travel near the distance to your plate and therefore reduces the amount of [pollutants released into our air](#). Eating locally helps the environment, your health, as well as supports small family farms and the local economy.

Michelle Nikkel, Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., April 3, 2010:](#)

Anything accomplished?

You know that Fresno's air quality is bad when you move from Los Angeles to Fresno and then contract asthma. Having lived in Fresno almost all my life, bad air quality is something that you just get used to; here in Fresno we don't have snow days, we have spare the air days. People who rarely leave Fresno almost forget how bad the air is, until you go up to the mountains or to the coast and can literally see the haze surrounding the Valley as you return.

I remember three years ago when The Bee published the special feature titled "Fighting for Air." The article was very well written, and I thought it addressed several important issues, especially the outline of the plan that Fresno had for cleaning up our air. However, since then I haven't seen much follow up. I think that The Bee should do a follow up feature on how much policymakers have actually accomplished in cleaning up our air so that we can hold them accountable for the promises that they have made to us.

Stacy Betts, Fresno