

Opinion

COMMENTARY

STOCKTON COULD LEAD THE WAY

THE CITY'S PROPOSAL TO REDUCE SPRAWL WOULD SET AN EXAMPLE FOR REST OF CALIFORNIA

By **Jerry Brown**
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Tonight, the Stockton City Council confronts a historic agreement that over the next several decades will affect air quality, farmland, commute times and the kind of housing tens of thousands of people will live in.

The proposed agreement charts a bold path for less oil-dependent development. It envisions growth downtown and near the city's existing neighborhoods, reduces sprawl, promotes public transit and encourages more energy-efficient buildings.

Until the recent mortgage debacle, almost every week, you saw construction begin on a new housing tract somewhere in the Valley. Over the past decade, the area's population grew 20 percent, and within the next few decades, both the Valley and Stockton are projected to double in size.

As the population increases - unless developers change their ways - there will be more sprawl, more unhealthy chemicals in the air, more traffic congestion, longer commutes and more hard-earned savings eaten up by rising gasoline prices.

By 2040, the San Joaquin Valley will have lost another 1 million acres of farmland. Currently, most of California's agricultural production, accounting for 25 percent of our nation's food supply, takes place in the Valley.

Air quality in the region will become increasingly unhealthy; the Valley already has five of the 10 smoggiest cities in the country. By 2050, Valley residents will generate twice the volume of greenhouse gases they produce now, more than 200 million metric tons annually, and will consume approximately 7.18 billion gallons of oil a year. This will exacerbate our dangerous dependence on foreign oil and contribute to rising food prices.

We have to act now if these ultimately catastrophic trends are to be reversed. Unchecked sprawl will degrade Stockton's quality of life and make it impossible to meet our state's greenhouse gas reductions targets.

Cars and trucks contribute the most greenhouse gases in the state - close to 40 percent. At the same time, rising gasoline prices are putting a terrible strain on working families. Wise and careful planning that links housing with jobs will cut down on driving, which will decrease auto emissions and help families make ends meet.

Limiting sprawl can preserve farmland, protect wildlife habitat and save precious water resources. It also can mean safer communities.

Family-centered neighborhoods with stores and jobs in close proximity and streets where people easily walk or bike are safer and experience far less crime.

It's not a coincidence that Stockton's violent crime rate nearly doubled from 1999 to 2005 just as its sprawl

worsened.

The measures called for by the proposed agreement will place Stockton in a leadership role in dealing with climate change and the negative ramifications of urban sprawl.

When the state government in Sacramento is paralyzed by petty politics and special interest pressures, Stockton can show the way.

Contrary to statements from some developers, the measures in this agreement are reasonable and cost-effective and are the result of months of analysis and discussion.

Before granting irrevocable vested rights for tens of thousands of new residential and commercial buildings, I urge the City Council to accept the city manager's recommendation and vote approval of this agreement.

Brown is California's attorney general and former governor.