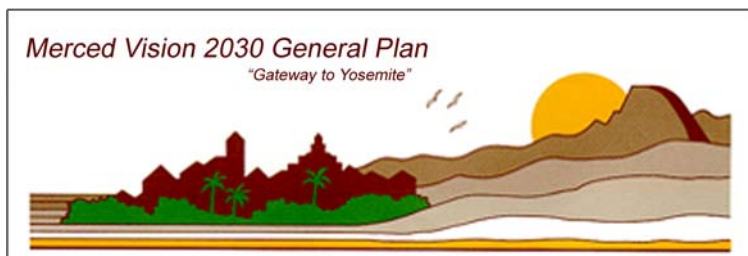


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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 WHAT WILL MERCED BE LIKE IN THE YEAR 2030?

It has been projected that twenty million people will be added to California's population by the year 2030. A significant portion of this population growth is expected to find its way into the San Joaquin Valley. Merced, like many other Valley communities, must be prepared to respond to the challenges and changes that population growth pressures will bring to this area.

Currently, Merced residents enjoy Merced's compact size, its small-town feeling, surrounding agricultural and open space land, the parks and historic structures, the beautiful tree-lined streets, the creek side bikeways, etc. These are the result of much effort on the part of concerned citizens and appointed and elected officials. These people looked at what the City was and decided what they wanted it to become. This is "planning"--and what the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* is all about. It builds on the efforts and visions of the past and states the aspirations for the future. The challenge, laid down by those who have preceded us, is to guide our City's growth into the new millennium in such a manner that our children and our children's children

may enjoy the same high quality of life that we enjoy today.

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* envisions a growing community that preserves much of its small town flavor and social setting, a city that has an improved economy, adequate public services and cultural facilities, and a good overall quality of life for its residents. In 2030, people will have various transportation options. Parks and open spaces will link residential, commercial, and employment centers in such a manner as to provide an attractive pedestrian and bicycle alternative to driving. Convenient public transit systems will serve these areas as well.

The future of Merced includes the continuing expansion of the 10th University of California Campus, UC Merced, and connection to an improved rail system. The UC campus will provide a major educational resource to the City and its residents, and the improvements to the rail and highway systems will link Merced with all of the major metropolitan areas of the state. The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* anticipates these developments and contains policies and strategies for maximizing the benefits that they will bring to our community.

1.2 WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN?

A General Plan for a city functions much as a constitution for a nation. It is a guiding framework for land use decisions. The General Plan is a statement of the community's vision of its long-term or ultimate physical form.

Preparing the General Plan can be viewed as an activity which sharpens and focuses the many concerns of citizens within the community and provides structure by which these often conflicting concerns can be forged into a common vision for the future. By focusing attention on issues facing the community and placing them in an expanded time frame, the General Plan helps citizens see their community as a complex system--a living entity that grows and responds to problems and opportunities facing the community.

Preparing a general plan serves the following purposes:

- To enable the Planning Commission and City Council to reach agreement on long-range development policies;
- To provide a basis for judging whether specific private development proposals and public projects are consistent with these policies;
- To allow other public agencies and private developers to design projects that are consistent with City policies, or to seek changes in these policies through the General Plan Amendment process;
- To identify the community's environmental, social, and economic goals;
- To record the City's policies and standards for the maintenance and

improvement of existing development and the location and characteristics of future development;

- To provide citizens with information about their community and with opportunities to participate in the local planning and decision-making process.



1.3 LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

California State law (Government Code Section 65302) requires all cities and counties to have an adopted general plan. This General Plan serves as the blueprint for the community's future growth and development. The General Plan must address certain issues which are directly related to and influence land use decisions. The City Council adopts the General Plan by ordinance as a legal document.

The law specifies that each general plan address seven issue areas, known as "elements," which must be consistent with each other. The seven required elements are: 1) Land Use; 2) Circulation; 3) Open Space; 4) Conservation; 5) Housing; 6) Noise; and 7) Safety. **Table 1.1** in Section 1.4.1 shows where each State general plan requirement is located within the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*.

The plan must analyze issues of importance to the community, set forth policies for conservation and development, and outline specific programs or actions for implementing these policies. City actions, such as those relating to the approval of development projects, zoning and subdivision ordinances, specific plans, and capital improvements, must be consistent with the General Plan.

The General Plan shall be utilized as a whole. One section is not to be used at the expense of others, but all of them shall be used together, with flexibility. Employed in this way, the General Plan becomes a powerful tool for ensuring consistency of City actions, while remaining responsive to the changing needs of the times. When optional elements are added to the General Plan, they have the same status as a mandated element, and no single chapter or subject supersedes the other.

1.3.1 Maps and Diagrams

The Land Use Diagram is an integral part of the General Plan. The diagram graphically expresses the Plan's development policies by showing the desired arrangement and general location of land uses. The diagram is required to be consistent with the General Plan text under California Government Code Section 65302. To be useful to City officials, staff, and the public, the Land Use Diagram must allow anyone who uses the Plan to reach the same conclusion about the designated use of any property covered by the plan.

Figure 3.1 is the City's Land Use Diagram and can be found in the map pocket at the back of this document. It presents the general distribution of the uses of land within the City of Merced and its SUDP/SOI

(or growth boundary). The word "Diagram" is distinguished from "Map" in the context of a California Attorney General Opinion (67 Ops.Cal.Att.Gen.75) to provide a certain limited degree of flexibility in applying the Land Use Designations (described in Sections 3.3.3 and 3.9 of the Land Use Chapter) to specific parcels of land. A "diagram" shows the approximate arrangement of and relationships between land uses rather than the precise location and detailed boundaries of land uses which a "map" (like a zoning map) would show.

The Land Use Diagram and text together specify the number of people and dwelling units per net acre of land for each property planned for residences and the building intensity for all other proposed development. This building intensity is expressed in terms of a floor area ratio, which is the gross floor area permitted on a site divided by the total net land area of the lot. Other pertinent features of the Land Use Diagram include the locations of existing and proposed parks, public schools, and other public facilities such as fire stations.

General plans also must contain a circulation element. This element shows the location and extent of existing and proposed thoroughfares, transportation routes, terminals, and other local public utilities and facilities, and correlates them with the land use element. Maps are needed to show location. Merced's Circulation Plan (**Figure 4.1**) shows current and proposed arterials, collector streets, and local streets as well as bikeways and rail lines (on separate maps). This roadway system has been tested against the planned level proposed in this plan and has been found to be adequate.

Together, the Land Use Diagram and Circulation Plan graphically show the

managed growth of the City for the next 20 years. The General Plan also contains other maps and diagrams that show various features of Merced and help illustrate various goals and policies of the General Plan.

1.3.2 Goals, Policies and Actions

The heart of the General Plan is the set of integrated and internally consistent “Goals,” “Policies,” and “Implementing Actions” in each chapter. *Goals* are long range; they state finished conditions--the community’s vision of what should be done and where. *Policies* and *Implementing Actions* are short to intermediate range. *Policies* state the City’s clear commitment on how these *Goals* will be achieved. *Implementing Actions* carry out the *Policies* and are specific, such as defining land areas to be rezoned or bicycle lanes to be added.

Together, *Policies* and *Implementing Actions* establish who will carry out the activities needed to meet the *Goals* as well as how and when the *Goals* will be met. *Policies* and *Actions* guide day-to-day decision-making, so there is continuing progress toward the attainment of *Goals*. Some *Policies* and *Actions* may need to be re-examined and revised during the course of General Plan implementation. While not changing the basic desirability of the *Goals*, *Policies*, and *Actions* in the long term, they will be carried out when suitable resources are available.

An example of how the *Goals*, *Policies*, and *Implementing Actions* are set forth in this plan can be seen below along with a definition of each:

Goal Area I-1: Definitions of Goals, Policies, and Implementing Actions

GOALS

- **Goal - A General, Overall, and Ultimate Purpose, Aim, or End Toward Which the City Will Direct Effort**

I-1 Policy = A specific statement of principle or guiding action which implies clear commitment. A general direction that the City shall follow in order to meet its goals by undertaking specific action programs. It is assumed that each policy statement is preceded by the phrase, “The City shall...”

Policy I-1

A Specific Statement of Principle or Guiding Action

Implementing Actions:

- 1.1.a Implementing Action = An action, activity, or strategy carried out in response to adopted Policy to achieve a specific Goal.**

Following each Implementing Action is a statement clarifying its meaning or explaining the specific manner in which it will be carried out.

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE PLAN

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* is an update, expansion, and reorganization of the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* (adopted in April 1997). This General Plan consists of two separate documents:

- 1) *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*; and
- 2) *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR)*,

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan Executive Summary* provides a brief overview of the General Plan with a summary of goals and policies (and implementing actions) for each subject area.

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* document is organized into eleven different chapters covering all the elements required by State law. Each chapter consists of text, diagrams, and other illustrations relating to an aspect of the City's growth and development. The text explains the issues and discusses them, then states Goals, Policies, and Implementing Actions. The seven mandated elements are:

- Land Use (Chapter 3)
- Circulation (Chapter 4)
- Open Space (Chapter 7)
- Conservation (Chapter 7)
- Housing (Chapter 9)
- Noise (Chapter 10)
- Safety (Chapter 11)

Table 1.1 shows where each State general plan requirement is located within these chapters.

Other issues are important to the City of Merced but are not required to be separate

elements under State law. These issues--Urban Expansion (Chapter 2), Public Facilities (Chapter 5), Urban Design (Chapter 6), and Sustainable Development (Chapter 8)--are covered in additional chapters of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*. These elements were also included in the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* and have been updated and expanded with this General Plan.

The Land Use, Circulation, Open Space, and Conservation Elements were last comprehensively updated in 1997. These four required elements have been comprehensively updated and expanded with this General Plan.

The Housing Element was comprehensively updated (and certified by the State Housing and Community Development Department) in 2003, the Noise Element in 1993, and the Safety Element in 1995. With exception of the Housing Element, which was updated and adopted separately in accordance with the schedule in State law on November 21, 2011, these elements have also been comprehensively updated with this General Plan. The 2011 Housing Element was certified by the State Housing and Community Development Department as being in compliance with State law on December 20, 2011.

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan Program EIR* (SCH# 2008071069) documents how the proposed plan will impact the environment in the seventeen subject areas required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The EIR also evaluates three different growth alternatives and proposes mitigation measures to reduce environmental impacts.

1.4.1 Plan Contents

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* is organized into fifteen chapters which address the following subjects:

- **Chapter 1 – Introduction** provides the context within which the Plan has been developed and describes its organization.
- **Chapter 2 – Urban Expansion** sets forth the direction of future City growth. The goals, policies, and actions of this Chapter guide future urban growth and provide a framework within which future urban expansion policies can be developed.
- **Chapter 3 – Land Use** contains the basic land use policies which will be used to guide residential, commercial, and industrial development in the City. The “Urban Village” concept of mixed-use and circulation-friendly development continues to be the City’s primary new growth pattern.
- **Chapter 4 – Transportation and Circulation** establishes policies and programs for development of an integrated municipal circulation and transportation system that accommodates all modes of transit (automobiles, bicycles, rail, air, etc.).
- **Chapter 5 – Public Services and Facilities** addresses the public service and facility needs of an expanding municipal population and identifies strategies for meeting those needs.
- **Chapter 6 – Urban Design** provides ideas, in addition to policies, on how urban design concepts can be applied in Merced to promote sustainable development and to maintain a high quality of life.
- **Chapter 7 – Open Space, Conservation, and Recreation** contains goals and policies for the development and maintenance of public and private open space areas in the City and for the future expansion of the City’s park system.
- **Chapter 8 – Sustainable Development** addresses the approaches for preserving the City’s soil, water, wildlife, air, energy, and historic/cultural resources.
- **Chapter 9 – Housing** (adopted November 21, 2011) contains policies and programs for assuring that safe and adequate housing is available to City residents.
- **Chapter 10 – Noise** contains policies and programs focused on reducing urban noise levels.
- **Chapter 11 – Safety** contains policies and programs addressing potential safety issues including seismic events, flooding, crime, fire, hazardous materials, and others.
- **Chapter 12 – Glossary of Terms** defines terms used in the General Plan.
- **Chapter 13 – Bibliography** outlines a list of resources used to develop the General Plan.
- **Chapter 14 – Policy Index** is a guide to the various goals, policies, and implementing actions in the Plan.
- **Chapter 15 – Resolutions** contains the Planning Commission and City Council Resolutions adopting the General Plan.



Table 1.1
Relationship of General Plan Chapters to State-Mandated Elements

Mandated Elements	General Plan	
	Section	Pages
LAND USE ELEMENT (Chapter 3)		
Distribution of Housing, Business, & Industry	Figure 3.1	Map Holder
Distribution of Agricultural Lands & Open Space	Figure 3.1	Map Holder
Standards of Population Density and Building Intensity	3.3.3; 3.9	3-6; 3-78
Land Use Diagram	Figure 3.1	Map Holder
Distribution of Recreation Facilities, Educational Facilities, and Public Buildings and Grounds	Figure 3.1	Map Holder
Flood Areas	11.2.4; Figures 11.4 & 11.5	11-10; 11-12; 11-13
Future Solid and Liquid Waste Facilities	5.2.4; 5.2.6	5-8; 5-10
Mineral Resources	7.2.5	7-13
Timberland Preserve Zone Lands	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
Implementation	3.4.4; 3.5.6; 3.6.3	3-15; 3-41; 3-58
CIRCULATION ELEMENT (Chapter 4)		
Description of Existing System	4.3	4-7
Standards of Population Density and Building Intensity	3.3.3; 3.9	3-6; 3-78
Maps of Existing and Proposed Systems	Figure 4.1	4-5
Description of Proposed System	4.3; 4.4; 4.8.3	4-7; 4-28; 4-88
Major Thoroughfares and Transportation Routes	4.3.3; 4.3.4; Figure 4.2	4-11; 4-15; 4-8
Terminals and Local Public Utilities and Facilities	4.3; 5.2.9	4-7; 5-16
Implementation	4.6	4-41
OPEN SPACE ELEMENT (Chapter 7)		
Open Space for Preservation of Natural Resources	Goal Area OS-1	7-20
Open Space for Managed Production of Resources	Goal Area OS-2	7-27
Ground Water Recharge	5.3.3; 7.6.6	5-19; 7-39
Agricultural Lands	7.2.1; 8.2.1; 8.5.1	7-2; 8-3; 8-42
Open Space for Outdoor Recreation	Goal Area OS-3	7-28
Scenic, Historic, and Cultural Values	Goal Area OS-1; Goal Area SD-2; 8.2.6	7-20; 8-35; 8-15
Trails, Links, and Park and Recreation Access	4.3.8; 7.2.2;	4-24; 7-3
Open Space for Public Health and Safety	Goal Area OS-4	7-34
Integration with California Recreational Trails System	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
Action Program/Implementation	7.5; 7.7; 8.4	7-19; 7-39; 8-22

Table 1.1 (Continued)
Relationship of General Plan Chapters to State-Mandated Elements

Mandated Elements	General Plan	
	Section	Pages
CONSERVATION ELEMENT (Chapter 7)		
Forests, Rivers, and Wildlife	7.2.3; 8.2.3	7-7; 8-7
Water	5.2.3; 7.2.4; 8.2.2	5-6; 7-12; 8-3
Soils	8.2.1; 8.5.1	8-3; 8-42
Flood Control	5.2.5; 11.2.4	5-9; 11-10
Archeological Resources	7.2.6; 8.2.6	7-14; 8-15
Harbors and Fisheries	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
Minerals	7.2.5	7-13
Air Quality	8.2.4	8-10
Implementation	7.5; 8.4	7-19; 8-22
HOUSING ELEMENT (Chapter 9)		
Adopted separately (and certified by State HCD)		
NOISE ELEMENT (Chapter 10)		
Noise Sources	10.2	10-6
Extent of Noise Problems in Community	10.2	10-6
Existing and Projected Noise Contours	Figures 10.6 & 10.7	10-21; 10-22
Noise Attenuation Methods	10.1.3	10-5
Implementation	10.3	10-31
SAFETY ELEMENT (Chapter 11)		
Seismic and Geologic Hazards	11.2.1	11-2
Slope Instability/Subsidence	11.2.2	11-5
Seiche and Dam Failure	11.2.3	11-8
Flooding	11.2.4	11-10
Fire Hazards and Peak Water Supply	11.2.5	11-16
Emergency Response and Evacuation	11.1.2; 11.2.5	11-1; 11-16
Hazardous Materials	11.2.8	11-29
Implementation	11.3	11-30

1.5 SPECIFIC GOALS AND VISIONS

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* aims to achieve the following Goals, organized by chapter:

1.5.1 Urban Expansion

- A Compact Urban Form
- Preservation of Agriculturally Significant Areas
- Efficient Urban Expansion

1.5.2 Land Use

Residential & Neighborhood Development

- Housing Opportunities in Balance with Jobs Created in the Merced Urban Area
- A Wide Range of Residential Densities and Housing Types in the City
- Preservation and Enhancement of Existing Neighborhoods
- Quality Residential Environments
- Mixed-use, Transit and Pedestrian-Friendly Residential Environments
- Ensure Adequate Housing is Available to All Segments of the Population



Economic Development

- Increased Employment Opportunities for the Citizens of Merced

- A Diverse and Balanced Economy
- Preservation and Expansion of the City's Economic Base
- High Quality Industrial Areas
- More High-Quality Research & Development Parks
- Ready Access to Commercial Services Throughout the City
- A Distinguished Downtown

Urban Growth and Design

- Living Environments which Encourage People to Use a Variety of Transportation Modes
- A Compact Urban Village Design for New Growth Areas
- Self-sustaining, Mixed-Use, Pedestrian-Friendly Villages
- Transit-Oriented Development Adjacent to the High Speed Rail Station



1.5.3 Transportation and Circulation

Streets and Roads

- An Integrated Road System that is Safe and Efficient for Motorized Uses
- A Circulation System that is Convenient and Flexible
- A Circulation System that Minimizes Adverse Impacts upon the Community
- A Comprehensive System of "Complete Streets" Which Address All Modes of Transportation

Bicycles, Pedestrians, and Public Transit

- An Efficient and Comprehensive Public Transit System
- A Comprehensive System of Safe and Convenient Bicycle Routes (Within the Community and Throughout the Urban Area)
- A Comprehensive System of Safe and Convenient Pedestrian ways
- A Comprehensive System of “Complete Streets” Addressing All Modes of Transportation
- Air and Rail Systems that Provide Safe and Convenient Service to the Community



1.5.4 Public Services and Facilities

- Maintenance and Improvement of Merced's Existing Infrastructure.
- New Development Which Includes a Full Complement of Infrastructure and Public Facilities
- Efficient and Cost-Effective Public Service Delivery
- Maximum Crime and Fire Protection Services
- An Adequate Water Source, Distribution and Treatment Infrastructure System in Merced

- An Adequate Wastewater Collection, Treatment and Disposal System in Merced
- An Adequate Storm Drainage Collection and Disposal System in Merced
- Solid Waste Management Services That Accommodate the Local Population Without Causing Significant Damage to Environmental Resources
- Adequate School Facilities for All Students in the Merced Urban Area
- Excellent Cooperative Relationships between the City, the School Districts, and the Development Community
- Support for Cultural and Community Services that Improve and Maintain the Quality of Life for the Residents of Merced
- Development of Infrastructure and Service to Allow All Merced Residents to Utilize New Technologies to Communicate with the Region, the Nation, and the World



1.5.5 Urban Design

- An Integrated Urban Form
- Transit-Ready Community Design
- Pedestrian- and Bicycle-Compatible Neighborhoods
- A Unique Community Image
- Attractive Neighborhoods and Districts
- Attractive and Memorable Public Streets



1.5.6 Open Space, Conservation, and Recreation

- Maintenance of Merced's Biological Resources
- A High-Quality, Expanding Urban Forest
- Preservation of Scenic Corridors and Resources
- Improvement and Enhancement of Water Quality
- Protection of Regional Agricultural Resources
- High-Quality Recreational Open Space
- Adequate Public Recreation Facilities
- Comprehensive Urban Trail and Bike Path System
- A Safe Environment For Merced's Citizens
- Conservation of Water Resources

- Preservation and Protection of Soil Resources

1.5.7 Sustainable Development

- Clean Air With Minimal Toxic Substances and Odor
- Clean Air with Minimal Particulate Content
- Effective and Efficient Transportation Infrastructure
- Coordinated and Cooperative Inter-Governmental Air Quality Programs
- Reduction in the Generation of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) from New Development
- A Diverse and Rich Historic and Cultural Resource Environment
- A Long-Term Community Historic Preservation/Improvement Program
- Sustainable Energy Resource Use in the City of Merced
- Healthy Lives for Community Residents
- A Healthy Environment for All Residents

1.5.8 Housing

- Increase the Stock of Affordable Housing
- Encourage a Mix of Housing Throughout the City to Meet the Needs of Different Income Groups
- Conservation and Rehabilitation of the Existing Housing Stock
- Increase Homeownership Opportunities
- Coordinate Innovative Housing Efforts
- Equal Opportunity Housing

1.5.9 Noise

- To Protect City residents from the Harmful and Annoying Effects of Exposure to Excessive Noise
- To Protect the Economic Base of the City by Preventing Incompatible Land Uses from Encroaching upon Existing or Planned Noise-Producing Uses
- To Encourage the Application of State of the Art Land Use Planning Methodologies in Areas of Potential Noise Conflicts



1.5.10 Safety

- General Disaster Preparedness
- Reasonable Safety for City Residents from the Hazards of Earthquake and Other Geologic Activity
- A City Free From Other Than Street Flooding
- Fire and Hazardous Material Safety for the Residents of the City and For Those Working in Fire Suppression
- A Safe Airport Environment Both Above and On the Ground
- Reduced Criminal Activity and an Increased Feeling of Safety and Security in the Community
- Hazardous Materials Safety for City Residents

1.6 THE GENERAL PLAN PROCESS

The City of Merced began formally looking toward its future growth and development beginning in 1959 with the adoption of its first General Plan. Comprehensive General Plan updates have taken place in 1968, 1981 and 1997.

In 1990, the *Merced 2030: How Should We Grow?* process (Section 2.2.2) looked 40 years into the future and foresaw a community growing to the north and northeast around Lake Yosemite in a series of self-contained “villages.” In 1992, the *North Merced Conceptual Land Use Plan* sketched out a series of these villages for a 20-year study area. The decisions made during these two long-range planning efforts guided the preparation of the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan*, which was adopted in 1997 after a nearly five-year process.

The *Merced Vision 2030 Plan* process itself began in June 2005, with the hiring of a general plan consultant (a change was made to Quad-Knopf in August 2006). Various public forums, stakeholder and property owner meetings, and joint City Council/Planning Commission study sessions were held throughout the process to solicit input from citizens, property owners, and decision makers on the proposed growth boundary, guiding principles, and policy issues to be addressed. The Planning Commission was appointed to serve as the General Plan Citizens Advisory Committee.

The result of this effort is the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* built upon the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* and ideas of Merced’s residents and looking towards a bright future of growth and prosperity, new opportunities, and new challenges.

1.7 ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* relies on several assumptions regarding existing and anticipated future conditions within Merced's growth area, otherwise known as the Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP)/Sphere of Influence (SOI). Specifically, these assumptions are:

- 1) The University of California Merced (UCM) campus will continue to expand in the vicinity of Lake Yosemite on the northeastern edge of the Merced growth boundary or SUDP/SOI along with a future University Community.
- 2) Future population growth in the Merced growth area will approach 155,000 by the year 2030.
- 3) In order to accommodate efficient levels of service delivery, regional urban development (residential, commercial and industrial) will be focused within the Merced City's growth area (SUDP/SOI) and not in the unincorporated areas surrounding the City.
- 4) The average household size in the SUDP/SOI will remain at approximately three people per dwelling unit.
- 5) To accommodate the future growth of the City's SUDP/SOI, the plan will need to accommodate at least 50,000 housing units (from 28,000 in 2010).
- 6) To accommodate future growth, sufficient land area will need to be set aside to support at least 35,000 employment opportunities within the City's growth area (from 22,000 in 2010).

- 7) Projected growth estimates will occur within the planning time-frames (20 years).
- 8) Growth beyond the SUDP/SOI boundary can be accommodated within the Area of Interest boundary, which has capacity for perhaps an additional 20 years worth of growth, at current rates.

If some of these events do not occur within the next 20 years, the General Plan goals and policies will need to be re-evaluated in light of changing conditions.

1.8 PLANNING AGENCIES

1.8.1 Planning Agency Organization

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* was prepared by the City's Planning Division, which is a division of the Development Services Department. The Development Services Department is made up of Planning and Permitting, Engineering, Housing, Code Enforcement, and Inspection Services. The Planning Division is under the direction of the Planning Manager, who reports directly to the Development Services Director.

Since the plan addresses many different issues, it has been developed in close cooperation with other City departments, Merced County, the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG), and many other local, state, and federal agencies.

1.8.2 Regional Planning Organizations

- *Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG)*
MCAG was established in 1967 by a joint powers agreement among the Cities of Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos, Merced, and the County of Merced. Its goal is to provide

and promote inter-jurisdictional planning. The agency's primary focus is regional transportation planning and advocacy for highway, bikeway, and transit projects. Other services include community planning, environmental planning, and providing technical planning services to member jurisdictions. MCAG's Governing Board, comprised of representatives from each city and the County, also approves policies and programs for the operation of the County's land-fills and source reduction and recycling programs.

- *San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (SJVAPCD)*

The SJVAPCD, formed in 1991, has jurisdiction over air quality matters in the San Joaquin Valley Air Basin, made up of eight member counties (San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern). The district oversees the regulation of stationary sources of pollution (industrial processes, etc.) and the implementation of transportation control measures aimed at reducing pollution from mobile sources (automobiles, etc.). The district also adopts air quality attainment plans, reviews local agency California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) documents, and suggests mitigation measures to reduce air quality impacts. The district adopts Air Quality Guidelines for General Plans to encourage local communities to adopt air quality policies as part of their general plans.

- *Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO)*

LAFCO's were created by the State in 1963 in order to oversee the growing complexity of overlapping, local governmental jurisdictions. Each county

in the State has its own LAFCO. LAFCO's are responsible for coordinating logical and timely changes in local government boundaries (annexations), conducting special studies which review ways to reorganize and streamline govern-mental structure, and preparing "Spheres of Influence" or ultimate growth boundaries (see Section 2.3.2) for each city and special district in each county. In Merced County, LAFCO is made up of five members--two representatives chosen on a rotating basis from among the six cities in the county, two members of the Merced County Board of Supervisors, and one public member chosen by the other four members.

- *Merced Irrigation District (MID)*

MID is a special district organized and operated under the California Water Code and locally controlled by a Board of Directors elected by voters living within the district boundaries. The district boundaries encompass approximately 250,000 acres in eastern Merced County, including the cities of Merced, Atwater, and Livingston, within a larger Sphere of Influence of 500,000 acres. Its primary function is to supply irrigation water to lands in the district as well as deal with drainage, power generation, flood control, and recreation issues.

- *Caltrans, District 10*

The mission of the California Department of Transportation (Cal-trans) is to "provide leadership on major transportation issues while working with other governmental jurisdictions to plan, develop, manage, and maintain a safe and efficient transportation system." The state is divided into twelve planning

districts. Merced County is in District 10, which also includes the San Joaquin Valley counties of San Joaquin and Stanislaus, five mountain counties (Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa, and Tuolumne), and Solano County in the Bay Area.

1.9 MERCED IN THE REGION

Located in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, the City of Merced is the Merced County seat as well as the retail commercial center for the surrounding region. Known as the “Gateway to Yosemite” because of its historic and current status as a stopping place for visitors on their way to Yosemite, Merced is just 80 miles from the national park.

Merced is approximately 150 miles southeast of San Francisco and is one of a chain of cities located along State Highway 99. Highway 99 is one of the two main north-south arteries connecting Southern California to the Pacific Northwest region. The City of Modesto is located 40 miles, Stockton 65 miles, and Sacramento 100 miles to the north of Merced along Highway 99. The City of Fresno is 55 miles and Bakersfield is 165 miles to the south along Highway 99.

1.9.1 The San Joaquin Valley and Merced County

The City of Merced is located near the geographic center of the County of Merced which is located in California’s San Joaquin Valley (part of the greater Central Valley) along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The County of Merced is bounded on the north by Tuolumne and Stanislaus Counties, on the east by Mariposa County, on the south by Fresno and Madera

Counties, and on the west by Santa Clara and San Benito Counties. Merced County, covering about 1,031 square miles, had a 2010 population of 258,495.

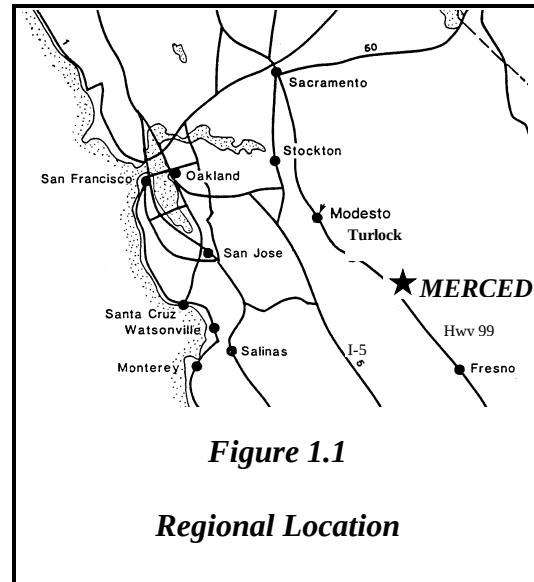


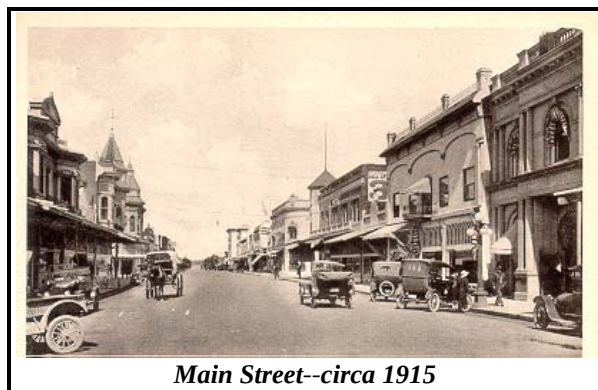
Figure 1.1
Regional Location

1.9.2 General Physical Setting

The City of Merced’s 2011 city limits are generally bounded on the west by State Highway 59 and Thornton Road, on the east by McKee and Tower Roads, on the north by Old Lake Road, and on the south by Dickenson Ferry Road/Mission Avenue. In 2011, the City of Merced covered approximately 23.1 square miles and had a population of approximately 80,000.

The City of Merced is approximately seven miles long from north to south and six miles at its widest point from east to west. The northern portion of the City is characterized by gently rolling terrain, while the southerly portion is relatively flat. The northern, western, and eastern portions of the City contain a number of creeks and canals including Bear Creek, Black Rascal Creek, Fahrens Creek, and Cottonwood Creek. Lake Yosemite and UC Merced are located approximately two miles north and east of

the City. The City of Atwater is located approximately four miles northwest of the City.



1.9.3 Historic Setting

In 1994, the City of Merced celebrated “50 Years of Modern Planning” in the City. Planning of the City, however has a long tradition of visionary thinking dating back to the early 1870’s. From its humble origins on the banks of Bear Creek up to the present, the City of Merced has been endowed with leadership and a strong community commitment which has resulted in the development of a city that is seen by many as a model of how urban development should occur in the San Joaquin Valley.

Early development in the San Joaquin Valley was driven by the development of the Central Pacific Railroad. Today, most of the major cities in the Valley are located along this historic rail line. Transportation corridors were a major influence in the growth and development of San Joaquin Valley communities and Merced is no exception.

In 1871, Charles H. Huffman was locating town sites along the new railroad line. Huffman oversaw the laying out of the new city’s grid type street system oriented along the alignment of the new railroad line. As a

result, the older parts of Merced between Bear Creek and the Central Pacific Railroad line are along a southeast/northwest trending angle.

Initial lot sales for the new City took place in early 1872, and within a few months several buildings were constructed or under construction. The general layout of the new City focused on the railway with the original El Capitan Hotel serving as a primary entry point into the City. In the 1870’s, the City served as an entry point to the gold mining industry of the region. Later, as Yosemite Valley became world renowned, Merced became an important gateway to Yosemite National Park.

Along with transportation, economics also played a major role in shaping the features and future of Merced. Perhaps one of the most profound influences on the design and growth of the City after its founding in 1871 was the relocation of the Merced County seat of government from Snelling to Merced. The Central Pacific Railroad offered four city blocks to the new county government for development of a new county courthouse.

The new courthouse, dedicated in 1875, was oriented towards the railroad line and connected to the railroad by Courthouse Avenue (now “N” Street) lined with palm trees. Early planners envisioned Courthouse Avenue and Huffman Avenue (“M” Street) as the main business section of the new city, but development occurred on the less expensive lots near the tracks along Main and Front (16th) Streets.

Merced’s commercial and industrial districts were well established by 1875. Commercial establishments located on the north side of Front Street with hotels, stables, and small

stores situated on Main Street behind the Front Street business district. The railroad depot, warehouses, and other industrial buildings were located along the tracks. Water was supplied to this area by a large elevated water tank near Main and "M" Streets.

Merced had three distinctive residential districts after only three years of existence. Most of Merced's residences were located on 18th and 19th Streets between J (now Martin Luther King Jr) and M Streets and on the eastern end of Main Street. The first prestige neighborhood in Merced was "Little Snelling," settled by former residents of the old county seat. Little Snelling was located south of the tracks across from the El Capitan Hotel, between N and O on 14th and 15th Streets and included elaborate homes.



Main Street--circa 1920

Chinatown, a compact self-sustaining community, was located one block to the east of Little Snelling, but was built at a higher density and included a mix of homes and businesses and a Buddhist Temple (or Joss House). Early churches and school facilities were developed in the vicinity of the new courthouse. The new city grew rapidly in the ensuing years, reaching a population of 1,525 by 1880 and 2,009 by 1890.

By 1888, the City had a street light system, and Lake Yosemite was constructed and supplied the City with water by 1889. By 1896, electrical power was being supplied to domestic and commercial customers by the Merced Falls Gas and Electric Company. The community's educational system was enhanced by the construction of Merced's first public high school in Courthouse Park in 1897.

Merced was incorporated as a sixth class Charter City on April 1, 1889. The new City consisted of 1,700 acres bounded by Bear Creek to the north, G Street to the east, Childs Avenue to the south, and West Avenue to the west.

In the late 1890's, transportation again had a major impact on the urban design of Merced. The San Francisco and San Joaquin Valley Railroad was granted a right-of-way through Merced. The railroad was given the use of 24th Street in the hope that the competition would force the Southern Pacific to lower its exorbitant freight rates. A station was built along the newly laid tracks near K Street in 1896. The elevated road bed may have retarded growth in northern Merced by greatly reducing access to this area, which remained rural in character until the 1920's. The railroad later became part of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe in 1900.

After the turn of the century, growth in the City was relatively modest. The most significant residential development was the opening of the Bradley addition in 1903, located on an extension of 21st Street to the east of the canal which ran down G Street, a street that marked the eastern boundary of the original town plan. Large 10 to 20 acre parcels with large homes were characteristic of this area.

Improvements in public services and utilities initiated during this period include the establishment of a sewer system (1901), the replacement of boardwalks and dirt paths with concrete sidewalks (1903), the construction of a new county hospital (1903), the addition of paved streets (1906), and the establishment of 24-hour electric service (1907).



Another significant transportation feature changed the growth characteristics of the City with the construction of the Yosemite Valley Railroad (1905-1907). The station was located off the end of Main Street in the present day Westgate Shopping Center while the roundhouse and support facilities were situated where Fremont School stands today. The tracks, laid down the middle of R Street, may have impeded growth in the west end of Merced, which did not develop until after the removal of the tracks in 1946.

The choice of Merced as the headquarters of the new railroad brought jobs to the City, increasing the demand for goods and services, and may have been a factor in the surge of both commercial and residential development that took place prior to World War I.

During the 1920's, Merced's residential districts expanded west to the Yosemite Valley railroad tracks on R Street, east to G Street, and north to Bear Creek, filling in

much of the area between the Santa Fe tracks and the creek. By 1930, Merced's population had increased to 7,066. With the opening of the Yosemite Highway (Highway 140) in 1926, 16th Street began to develop in response to increased automobile traffic. As a result, motels, restaurants, and automotive-related businesses were built along this stretch.

In the 1940's, Merced continued to change and grow, reaching a population of 10,000 in 1940. Significant residential growth occurred in Central and South Merced. Merced Airport and Merced Air Field (renamed Castle Air Field in 1947) in nearby Atwater were established in 1942. In 1944, the City's first Planning Commission was appointed. The City's first annexation since its incorporation in 1889 took place in 1946 with the addition of 480 acres east of G Street and south of Bear Creek.

The years following World War II brought more expansion and with it the need for more planning. The City Charter was adopted in April 1949, the City adopted its first zoning ordinance in 1950, and its first general plan and redevelopment project (15th Street) in 1959. The City expanded to the east with the first annexation in the East Merced Industrial Area in 1957 as well as to the north with the first annexation north of Bear Creek. The first annexation south of Childs Avenue occurred in 1958 and in southeast Merced in 1954.

By 1960, the City's population had reached 20,000 and growth was beginning to boom in North Merced. Merced Junior College was established in 1962 and annexed in 1964. The Merced Mall opened in 1969 in the City's first planned development. Single-family residential growth occurred east of G Street and north of Olive.



Main Street--circa 1960

The City adopted its first major general plan update in 1968, which signaled a change from the previous mainly east-west growth orientation along Highway 99/16th Street to the north-south growth pattern seen today. This plan actually foresaw the need for a University of California campus in the Valley and thought Merced would be competitive in attracting such a campus. Twenty-seven years later, the UC Regents finally agreed!

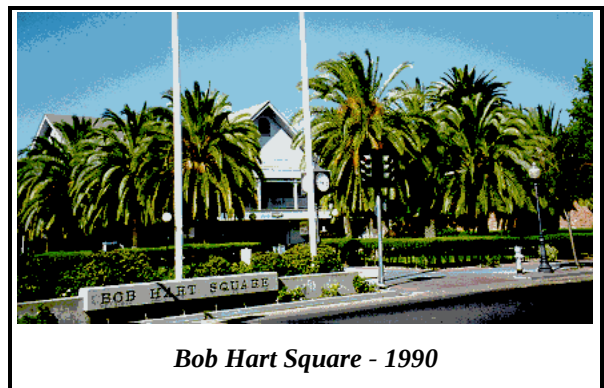
Another major change that would alter Merced's growth pattern also took place in the 1960's. In 1960, the elevated Highway 99 was constructed along 13th Street, effectively dividing South Merced from the downtown and creating three distinct sub-areas of Merced--1) North Merced, north of Bear Creek; 2) Central Merced, between Bear Creek and Highway 99; and 3) South Merced, south of Highway 99.

In 1971, a special census showed almost 27,000 people living in Merced. In 1973, the Airport Industrial Park was opened, Redevelopment Project Area No. 2 (Downtown) was established, and the Western Industrial Area was annexed. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, the City's Creekside Bicycle Path system developed and Merced continued to grow.

By 1980, Merced's population reached 37,000. A second major general plan update

was adopted in 1981. This effort established an official urban growth boundary that directed Merced's growth primarily to the north and south to avoid prime agricultural lands and areas subject to high flood levels to the City's east and west.

From 1980 to 1990, the City experienced a significant surge in residential construction activity, cumulating in the addition of 4,000 new dwelling units. Also during that ten-year period, Merced's Southeast Asian population grew from 570 in 1980 to 8,000 in 1990, an increase of over 1,300 percent and Merced's population reached 55,608.



Bob Hart Square - 1990

By 1990, the nationwide recession slowed down Merced's residential construction activity. However, the residential growth of the preceding decade precipitated a significant amount of commercial construction from 1992 to 1994. This included the addition of many new large discount stores, such as Costco, Walmart, Orchard Supply, etc.

In response to growth projections that anticipated a population of up to 250,000 people by 2030 (a five fold increase), the City embarked on a 40-year growth study, *Merced 2030: How Should We Grow?*, in 1990. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2 for details.) As a result of this study, the City established a "village" growth pattern for the ensuing 40 years and directed growth to

occur primarily to the north and northeast around Lake Yosemite.

In 1995, Merced's population stood at 61,712, Castle Air Force Base in neighboring Atwater closed, and Lake Yosemite was selected as the site for the next University of California campus. Also in 1995, the City adopted the Bellevue Ranch Master Development Plan (Section 3.7.1) for a 1,300-acre mixed use development in North Merced.



In April 1997, the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* was adopted and later received the 1997 Comprehensive Planning Award for a Small Jurisdiction from the California Chapter of the American Planning Association. Nearly 300,000 square feet of new industrial uses were developed in the City in 1997.

By 2000, Merced had 63,330 residents and 20,965 housing units and covered 20.94 square miles. In 2003, the Merced Marketplace regional shopping center opened on Olive Avenue with over 200,000 of new retail commercial space.

In Fall 2005, the UC Merced campus opened with great fanfare. By 2005, the City's population had increased to 73,610 and a record number of single-family building

permits (1,427) were issued in 2005. Unfortunately, a few years later, the economic downturn and foreclosure crisis led to only 9 single-family permits being issued in 2009.

In 2008, the South Merced Community Plan (Section 3.7.1) was adopted after an extensive public participation process. In September 2009, the Merced City Council approved the construction of a 1.1 million-square-foot Wal-Mart regional distribution center in Southeast Merced after a lot of public debate and environmental analysis.

From 1997 to 2010, the City annexed over 3,800 acres of new residential, commercial, and industrial land, and the City now covered 23.1 square miles with a population of 80,865. In May 2010, the new Mercy Medical Center Merced opened at G Street and Cormorant in North Merced replacing the old hospital in South Merced.



Within this planning context, the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* establishes a vision of what that future Merced will be like. This plan is intended to maintain the foresight practiced by the early citizens and leaders of Merced which resulted in Merced being considered a ***“Special Place”*** by most residents and visitors.

1.10 ADMINISTRATION OF THE GENERAL PLAN

Once adopted, the General Plan does not remain static. State law permits up to four General Plan amendments per mandatory element per year (Government Code 65358[b]), but as a Charter City, Merced is not bound by that limit. Most amendments propose a change in the land use designation of a particular property.

As time goes on, the City may determine that it is necessary to revise portions of the text to reflect changing circumstances or philosophy. State law provides direction on how cities can maintain the plan as a contemporary policy guide by requiring the Planning Department to report annually to the City Council on “the status of the plan and progress in its implementation” (Government Code 65400[b]).

In addition, the City should comprehensively review the General Plan every five years to determine whether it is still in step with community values and conditions. The Housing Element (last updated in 2003) has a set schedule for review, generally every five to seven years, based on State law. Merced’s Housing Element is being updated in 2010 in a separate process from the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*.

1.10.1 Amendments to the General Plan

Amendments to the General Plan may be initiated by the Planning Commission, City Council, City staff, or the general public. Detailed information on the procedure, timing, and costs for amendments is available from the City Planning Division. All amendments require application to the City and public hearings before the Planning Commission and City Council. Environmental review in accordance with the provisions of the California

Environmental Quality Act also will be required for every amendment.

California case law has found that any decision on a General Plan Amendment should be supported by findings of fact. These findings are the rationale for making a decision either to approve or deny a project. While specific findings may be applied on a project-by-project basis, at least the following standard findings should be made for each General Plan Amendment:

- 1) The proposed amendment is in the public interest and is consistent and compatible with the rest of the General Plan.
- 2) The potential effects of the proposed amendment have been evaluated and have been determined not to be detrimental to the public health, safety, or welfare.
- 3) The proposed amendment has been processed in accordance with the applicable provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act and the California Government Code.

Appendix A contains a list of all General Plan Amendments approved after the January 3, 2012, adoption date.

1.10.2 Adoption of the General Plan

The City of Merced Planning Commission held a public hearing on the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* on July 20, 2011 and unanimously recommended approval of the draft Plan, which included a 33,463-acre growth boundary.

After public hearings on September 19, 2011, October 17, 2011, November 7, 2011, and January 3, 2012, the Merced City Council adopted the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* by a 6-1 vote in accordance with Option 2, which included a 28,576-acre growth boundary. Please see Chapter 15 for the resolutions adopting the General Plan.