

Opinion: Fresno could become California's Austin

By Joe Mathews

Could the San Joaquin River, long a dividing line in our state, unite Central California in pursuit of a better future?

In Madera County, across the river from Fresno, a new unincorporated city of multiple planned communities is under construction. Within a generation, it seems likely to swell to more than 100,000 people. On the Fresno side, the county is developing open space, and the city of Clovis is expanding. Rising together, the new Madera town, Fresno, and Clovis could constitute a tri-cities area in Central California.



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If those three cities cohere into a stronger and wealthier region by mid-century—and that's a gigantic if—greater Fresno, now a relatively poor place of 1 million people, could transform into California's answer to Austin, an inland metropolis capable of spreading the Golden State's coastal prosperity to its dusty interior.

Of course, such a transformation would require extensive regional planning of the sort that Fresno's leaders sometimes talk about, but rarely do. That would mean stronger regional governance bodies and funding for transportation, economic development, water management, recreation, and air quality.

And such structures would require collaboration among local governments that have fought bitterly in court.

Unfortunately, the very structure of California, and its land-use planning, work against turning Fresno into a regional powerhouse. In our state, local jurisdictions are weak and have little power to raise their own revenues; so they must compete with other local governments, often using questionable subsidies, in the chase for development and the taxes it brings. The game is: support development that provides revenue for your city, while spreading the costs—in traffic, water, and air quality—onto your neighbors.

Madera and Fresno counties, and Fresno city, have often sued each other to block their respective development plans. But most of that litigation is over, offering an opportunity to build together.

The region needs a more resilient water infrastructure (the new Madera developments tout their water efficiency), and tax-sharing to improve the river itself and support a regional transportation network. The area also needs to develop and recruit more local government officials who have deep training and experience in regional planning.

The new river city ought to inspire these efforts. After all, Madera, the county on Fresno's northwestern flank, is saying via its new development that it doesn't want to be small, poor and isolated anymore. That's the same message all of greater Fresno must embrace.

Indeed, Madera County is pitching its new developments as a huge step forward for central California: master-planned communities with trails and schools and job centers and water recharge facilities wrapped in, providing the greater density and smaller lots of urban living.

The signature project, now under construction, is Riverstone, with commercial space and 6,600 homes of various sizes across

six themed districts, along Highway 41, best known to most Californians as a road to Yosemite. “The new-home community of Riverstone,” boasts one brochure, “will be a celebration of California living where people of every generation can enjoy the relaxed and informal spirit of the Golden State.”

Other developments in the pipeline—with names like Tesoro Viejo and Gunner Ranch—are supposed to offer a similar approach; county officials suggest they might be incorporated one day as the county’s third city (after Madera city and Chowchilla). These developments are close to Fresno County projects—like a town-size development near Friant Dam.

“This is going to be a new town and we have this opportunity with a blank canvas to do it right,” Madera County Supervisor Brett Frazier told a local TV station.

Much could go wrong. If the new river city doesn’t produce promised jobs and inspire better transportation, the expanded development could fuel sprawl, add to air pollution, and turn 41 into a traffic nightmare.

Successful regionalization will require outside help. The state’s climate change regime must prioritize infill development in central Fresno, so that the urban core isn’t weakened as people move to the new river city. The ongoing revival of Fresno’s downtown needs the added momentum of the state’s high-speed rail project, which is already under construction across Fresno County (a signature rail bridge is being built across the river, linking Madera and Fresno in another way).

Greater Fresno will gain if high-speed rail provides faster connections to Northern California and Southern California, making it an affordable crossroads between two world-class regional economies.

And Fresno has a large population of undocumented immigrants who badly need legal status so they can advance themselves,

and their region, economically.

You should not bet the farm on the grand project of turning greater Fresno into the next great region. But if Madera's new development can inspire progress in that direction, California would have reason to celebrate—and perhaps call the new river city Future Town.

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