

City of Fowler General Plan Update

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Summary

MEMO

September 24, 2019

From: Sara Allinder, Project Manager
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To: Jeannie Davis, City Manager

Subject: **Fowler General Plan Update**
STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS Summary

During the months of April and May of 2019, the consultant team for the City of Fowler's General Plan Update conducted 14 stakeholder interviews. The interviews were intended to solicit an understanding of issues and challenges the community currently faces, what aspects of the community stakeholders found to be beneficial to residents and local businesses, as well as what issues should be addressed as a priority in the General Plan Update.

This purpose of this memo is to provide a summary of these interviews and includes:

- The **key themes** identified, as informed by the feedback collected through the stakeholder interviews;
- The list of **interviewees**;
- The **approach** used in the interviews; and,
- A **summary of the comments** received.

The information identified in this memo will be considered during the City of Fowler General Plan Update process. Specifically, the input from the stakeholders will provide the basis for the draft Community Vision for Fowler, which will inform development of the goals, policies, and actions included in the General Plan.

KEY THEMES

The key themes identified below were derived from feedback received during the stakeholder interviews. These key themes will be combined with issues identified through preparation of a Fowler Community Report and be included in a Key Issues Summary for presentation to the Planning Commission and City Council.

Economic Development. Comments on the Chamber of Commerce included the recognition that the organization is still fairly young compared to more established chambers. Suggestions for improvement included a more comprehensive branding for the City, as well as implementation of more coordinated business support services. There was a desire to create a “one stop shop” for new businesses wishing to become established within the City.

Local Amenities. Lack of amenities, such as restaurants, shopping and entertainment contributes to low resident retention, which in turn, keeps population low and makes it hard for businesses to thrive. Increasing amenities which attract and keep residents in the area will be a key issue when considering strategies for economic development and increasing the community’s tax base.

Infrastructure Expansion. Lack of City infrastructure was noted as a major hurdle to successful city expansion to Fowler’s west side. Specific services of concern included traffic and road infrastructure capacity, police, water, and fire services. It should be noted that while service expansion is considered a top challenge, it was also identified as a top benefit of expanding the sphere of influence

Growth Coordination. While there was a high level of acknowledgement that City expansion was a key necessity in order to spark economic development, there was also recognition that land use and planning issues needed to be considered carefully. Community involvement in land use decisions, LAFCO coordination, and environmental regulations will be part of the challenges that lie ahead for planned expansion to the west side of the City. Several stakeholders commented on the need for coordination and due diligence on these topics prior to implementation.

Parks and Recreation. Currently, sports fields and parks operate under a joint use agreement with local school districts. While there was a recognition of a high level of cooperation between the City and the School districts, it was mentioned that these joint use agreements could be executed with more detail paid to maintenance issues and that it should be a priority to increase the number of parks in the community to alleviate demand on exiting park and school resources.

Community Character. While there was a high level of recognition that city expansion would be a key driver of economic growth and the backbone of future development within the City, there was also a concern for facilitating that growth in a way that maintains Fowler’s key asset: its small-town character. It was identified that Fowler’s identity as a small town and tight knit community should be considered and preserved in the face of expansion. It was also identified as a potential catalyst for branding.

INTERVIEWEES

Interviews were conducted with 14 total stakeholders representing diverse interests across the community, including the following individuals:

- Jessie Hudgins, Vice President, Valley Children’s Hospital
- Chelsey Marderosian, Accounting Manager, Bee Sweet Citrus
- Lori Gonzalez, Interim Superintendent, Fowler Unified School District
- Veronica Cazares, District Engineer, SKF Community Sanitation District
- Ben Munoz, General Manager, SKF Community Sanitation District
- Liz Gomez, Public Sector Representative, Waste Management
- David Cardenas, Mayor
- Leonard Hammer, Mayor Pro Tem

- Dan Parra, City Councilmember
- Mark Rodriguez, City Councilmember
- Karnig Kazarian, City Councilmember
- Jeannie Davis, City Manager
- David Peters, City Engineer
- Manuel Lopez, Fire Chief/Interim Public Works Director

APPROACH

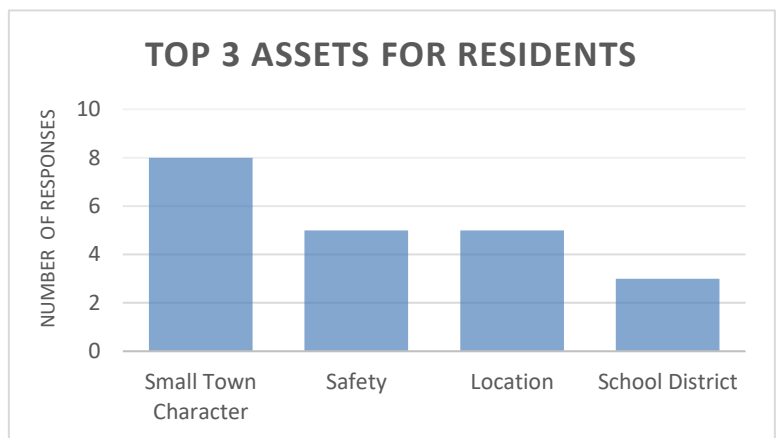
Provost and Pritchard staff interviewed stakeholders individually or, in some cases, in groups of two. While there was a standard list of questions prepared to ensure that interviewers touched on particular topics, the questions were not shared with the interviewees. This allowed the meetings to be more conversational and provided an opportunity for individual concerns to be expressed based on the interviewees’ relevant experience with City processes and challenges rather than be limited to pre-determined questions. Interviewees were also informed of the intent to keep individual comments confidential to encourage more frank discussions with the consultant team.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

The following summary of comments reflects individual feedback received during the stakeholder interviews. The summaries are organized by the standard list of questions asked of each interviewee. In analyzing each response for content, it was revealed that many of the interviewees had similar concerns, which were then sorted into major categories. Once sorted, comments were then quantified, revealing the top three priority areas for each question. These comments will inform the key issues identified in the Key Issues Summary Report.

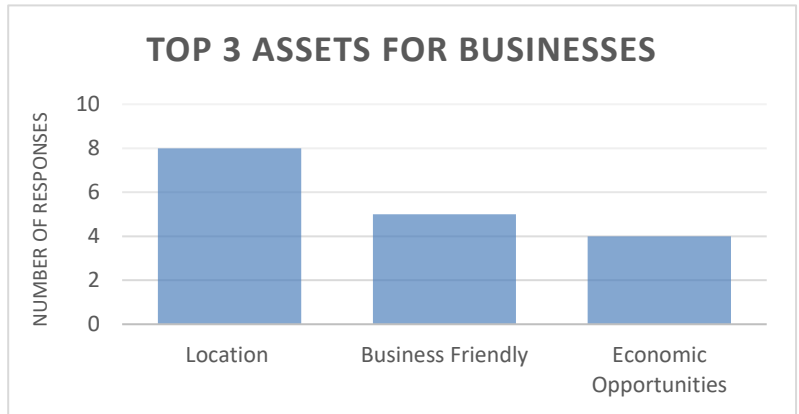
1. WHAT ARE THE TOP THREE ASSETS THAT THE CITY OF FOWLER OFFERS TO ITS RESIDENTS?

Stakeholders overall value that the City of Fowler possesses a small-town character, which fosters a sense of community, connection to one’s neighbors, safety, and town pride. Small-town character was the most frequent asset listed by interviewees. Safety and location were tied for second place and together make up the second highest ranked asset for the City of Fowler. Respondents referenced the City’s proximity to State Route (SR) 99, stating that easy access to the major transportation route, and larger metropolitan hubs by extension, made it a convenient place to live and raise a family. The school district was often stated as a key asset, however there was little elaboration on what exact characteristics elicited such a high level of satisfaction. Other assets which were stated less frequently include high levels of government cooperation with staff and residents, relatively high home values, and affordability.



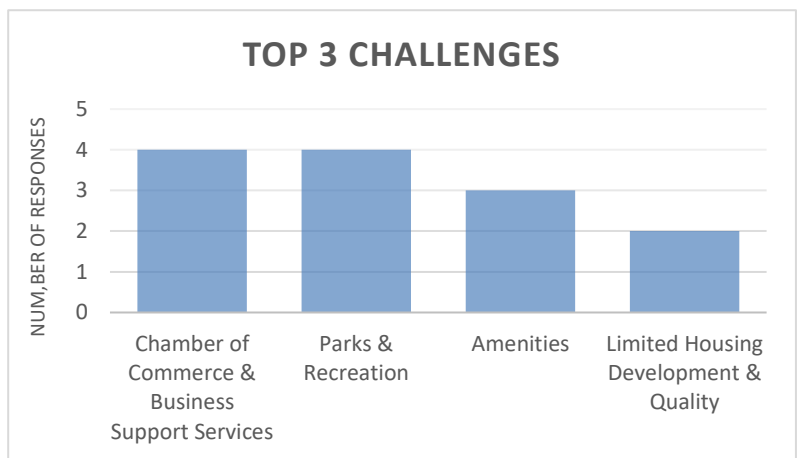
2. WHAT ARE THE TOP THREE ASSETS THAT THE CITY OF FOWLER OFFERS TO ITS BUSINESSES?

Stakeholders identified several key assets for businesses, with the top three including location, a business-friendly environment, and economic opportunity. Locational assets mainly relate to the City’s proximity to the SR 99 corridor and railroad accessibility, while economic opportunity refers to the high quantity of development opportunities within the City’s industrial core. A streamlined, relatively easy permitting process as well as City responsiveness contributed to the identification of Fowler as having a business-friendly environment. Other less frequent responses included safety, small community, and resident support of local businesses.



3. WHAT ARE THE TOP THREE ISSUES OR CHALLENGES THAT THE CITY OF FOWLER SHOULD FOCUS ON TO IMPROVE SERVICE TO EITHER ITS RESIDENTS OR BUSINESSES?

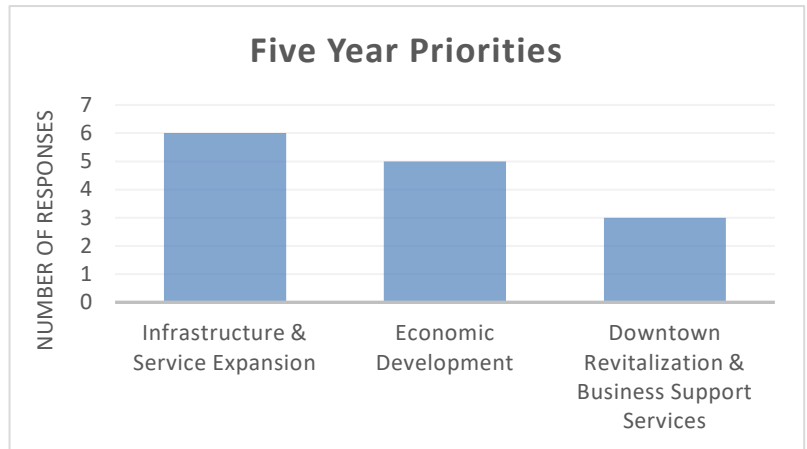
Stakeholder response to this question yielded four top responses, with the need for an expanded chamber of commerce and expansion of park services tying for first place. Lack of amenities and limited housing development and design standards came in third and fourth place, respectively. With regard to the chamber of commerce, it was noted that the chamber and its services were relatively young and limited compared to other more developed chambers. Coordinated branding and the creation of business support services were identified as



being two main areas for improvement for the current chamber of commerce. Park services were also identified as being a top challenge. Currently, park services are coordinated through joint use agreements with local schools. While there is a high level of coordination between the City and the Fowler Unified School District, it was stated that maintenance agreements may need to be coordinated at a higher level. In addition, current park facilities are in high demand and may need to be expanded. Housing availability and range of choice were listed as a challenge as well. It was stated that design guidelines for housing quality need to be developed, especially for higher density housing product. In addition to these main responses, other less frequent responses included circulation issues, development streamlining, limited staff resources, limited business ownership, slow economic growth, and small tax base.

4. WHAT ARE YOUR TOP PRIORITIES FOR THE CITY IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? 20 YEARS?

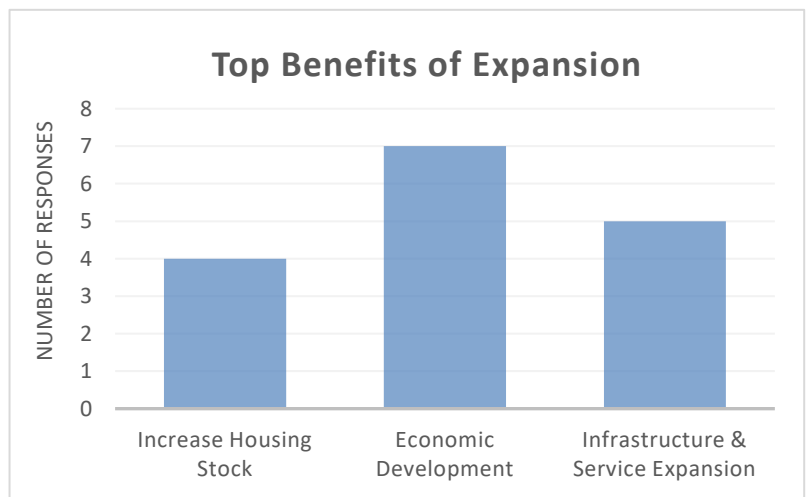
Five-year priorities for the City of Fowler parallel major themes identified within the City’s top challenges. Top responses include service expansion, economic development, and downtown improvements. Comments on service expansion specifically mentioned circulation issues, including truck routes, Golden State Corridor improvements, as well as connections between east and west Fowler. Downtown improvements included both physical improvements, such as façade rehabilitation, as well as coordinated service improvement which could potentially be provided through the Chamber of Commerce.



Twenty-year priorities were much more varied, with no real trends emerging. Overall, comments tended to reference the need to address and keep pace with future growth, although no specific issue was identified as being a top hurdle, challenge, or opportunity. Some topics mentioned include water issues, downtown improvements, branding, circulation, park and public facilities expansion, visioning, and public infrastructure.

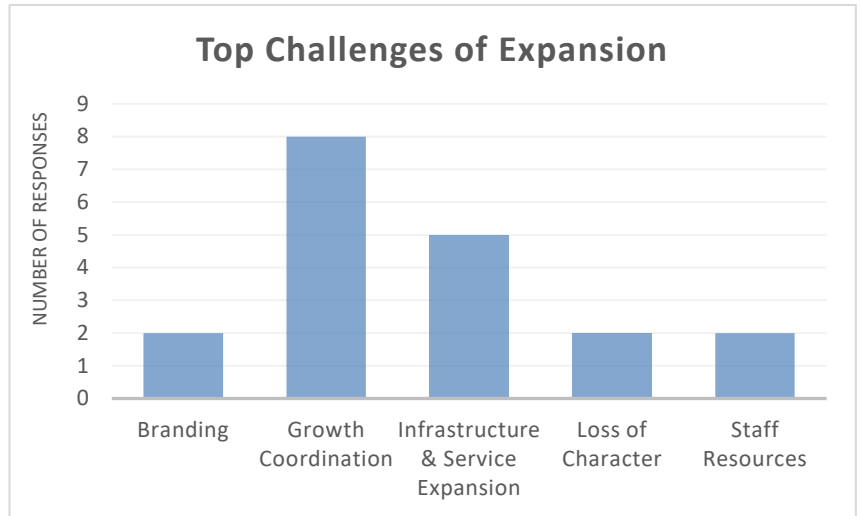
5. WHAT BENEFITS WOULD THERE BE IF THE CITY EXPANDS?

Top benefits of expansion include increased housing stock, economic development opportunities, and service expansion to the west side. Service expansion to the west side is recognized as a major facilitator of development in that area. Other economic development benefits include increased commercial opportunities, including amenities which might help facilitate resident retention. Less frequent responses included a larger tax base, positive impacts to downtown businesses, and additional access to SR 99.



6. WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE YOU THINK THE CITY FACES IF THEY DO EXPAND?

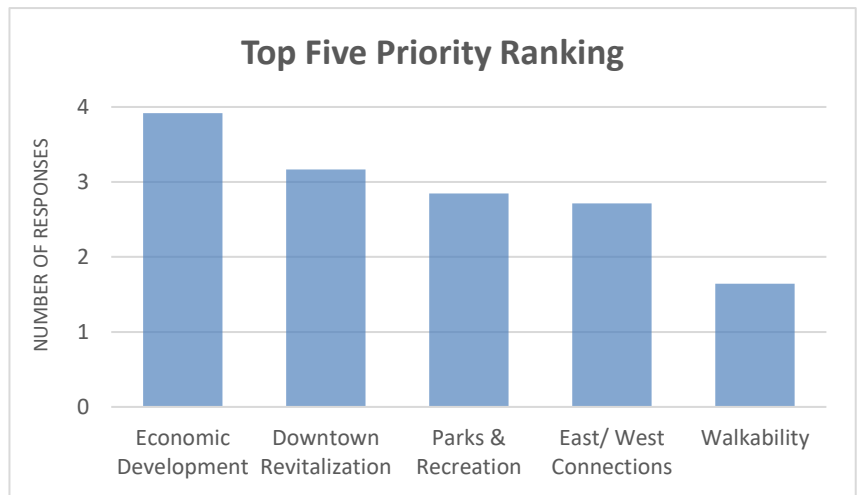
Land use planning and growth coordination was the top concern for stakeholders with regards to expansion challenges. This concern was mentioned considerably more often than any of the other responses. Concerns in this area include all aspects of the planning and development process, including Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) coordination, California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review, and land use planning. Lack of existing infrastructure within the expansion area was also cited as a major hurdle.



Although it should be noted that stakeholders also see implementation of service expansion as a top benefit of growth. Loss of small-town character, limited City staff resources, and lack of coordinated branding were all equally represented as potential challenges to expansion. Density challenges, City politics, and competition with other cities were also mentioned, although with less frequency than the topics identified above.

7. PLEASE LIST THE FOLLOWING IN ORDER OF PRIORITY. ONE BEING THE TOP PRIORITY AND FIVE BEING THE LOWEST.

Stakeholders were asked to evaluate five topics of concern for the City of Fowler and rank them in order, with one being the top priority and five being the lowest. Topics chosen for rank evaluation included economic development, connecting the east and west sides of Fowler, parks and recreation, walkability, and downtown revitalization. It should be mentioned that walkability and east/west connections were at times identified as having the same ranking. In addition,



some respondents felt that several of the categories really pertained to the same goal and were ranked equally as a result. For example, connecting the east and west sides of Fowler, downtown revitalization, and economic development were all identified as serving the same function and were ranked accordingly. Responses were analyzed by averaging various rankings by category. Economic development was a clear top priority, with downtown revitalization and parks and recreation coming in nearly tied for second and third place, respectively. The east to west connection was identified as the second to last priority, while walkability was identified as the lowest priority out of the five options. Additional priorities identified during the interviews included water rates, the amount of active recreation space, the need for water and storm drain master plans, and future water capacity.

ADDITIONAL NOTES, COMMENTS, AND CONCERNS

Several concerns were mentioned throughout the discussion which do not fit into the discussion topics noted above, including the following:

- There is a need for a community center for children.
- Joint Use Agreements for parks need to address maintenance issues.
- Add community events to help draw people into the City. These events can be focused on youth.
- The City's government offices may need to be relocated.
- There is a need for a community center and civic center.
- Truck routes should be incorporated as part of the Circulation Element.
- Focus on design guidelines and interface / compatibility guidelines.
- There is a need for a grocery store.