

Diminution of the Economic Development Element

The current General Plan encompasses a strategy for ending chronic poverty in the county through job creation and economic diversification — a strategy which the County never fully implemented. Perhaps it is time to reconsider whether the County should have an Economic Development Element as part of the General Plan.

In the fall of 1996, four years prior to the adoption of the current 2000-2020 General Plan, the County engaged UC Davis to survey county residents to gain insight into their concerns about future growth, resource protection and economic development. The university later published a report stating that the most common theme among participants in the survey was concern that population increases would aggravate already high levels of unemployment and poverty. Residents advocated for a County strategy to create better paying jobs through economic diversification and through greater support for the establishment of value-added agricultural industries — enterprises that transform raw agricultural products into products preferable in the broader marketplace.

The County subsequently prepared a 63-page Economic Development Strategy that became the centerpiece of the effort to update the General Plan in 2000. In fact, the Strategy's many strategic initiatives became the policies of the 2000-2020 Economic Development Element.

Key to the success of the new Economic Development Element was the formation of an Economic Development Action Team. The team was to be composed of County departments, the County Agricultural Commissioner, city representatives and regional organizations engaged in various facets of economic development in the county. Rather than adhering to this requirement, in 2002 the Board of Supervisors named itself the Action Team charged with providing the foundations for job growth and for ensuring that the benefits of growth were gained by workers through workforce development activities.

Over the next two decades, County leadership in economic development fell away, and today the majority

of the programs in the Economic Development Element pertaining to job creation and economic diversity are not being implemented, including requirements to hire personnel to oversee economic development, conduct periodic evaluations of the success in achieving the goals and targets of the Strategy and to assist agriculturalists in locating funding to overcome capital deficiencies in shifting to production that creates greater employment.

In 2011, the Board of Supervisors assigned some of the County's "economic development responsibilities" to the Fresno County Economic Development Corporation (EDC). The EDC is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit membership corporation that promotes business interests common to the Fresno region. (For over 20 years, the County has annually contracted with the EDC to promote the creation and retention of jobs and to market business opportunities in the county.)

In recent years, there has been some confusion as to who is responsible for implementing the County's Economic Development Element — the County, the EDC or both. In 2013, the County added to its annual contract with the EDC a requirement that the EDC help implement the policies and programs of the County's Economic Development Element. In 2014, members of the League of Women Voters of Fresno met with EDC personnel to clarify EDC's role in implementing that element. The EDC responded with a letter to the League saying, "The EDC is not directly involved in the economic development element of the County's General Plan." In contrast to this statement from the EDC, the County reported in its 2014 General Plan Annual Progress Report (finalized in 2015) that the EDC was under contract with the County "for implementation of the policies of the Economic Development Element of the General Plan." Uncertainty remains as to who is responsible for implementing the economic development policies of the General Plan.

With the 2020-2040 plan update, the County proposes to eliminate 11 of 12 implementation programs in the job creation and economic diversification sections of the General Plan Economic Development Element.