

Folsom firms up bid to annex land south of Highway 50

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The city of Folsom will cap years of planning later this year as it files a bid to expand by annexing more than 3,500 acres of prairie and oak woods south of Highway 50.

If the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission approves the application to annex the land at the eastern edge of Sacramento County next spring, the area south of Highway 50 promises to be one of the region's showcase "Blueprint" projects, city officials say.

The land is virtually untouched by development, with spreading oak trees and rolling hills that turn golden in summer. It is a clean slate, prime for smart local public transportation with links to the region, they say.

The proposal calls for 30 percent open space. It delivers a jump-start on a jobs-housing balance because of the area's existing jobs base.

What's the catch?

There are a few:

- The economy has decimated other plans for development – most notably in Elk Grove. Folsom officials say the economic downturn won't undercut that city's growth plans since the economic decline occurred well before the project would begin. There can't be construction anyway, they say, until the market for buyers comes back.
- The city and Teichert Aggregate are meeting with the county and other stakeholders to decide how hard rock from the mining operation south of the growth area can best be trucked to Highway 50.

Teichert, seeking a county permit to operate its plant, needs to find the shortest route to the freeway, but that would put it through the center of the expansion area. The city wants an alternate route, one that Teichert officials say could add millions of dollars to the cost of supplying raw materials for construction in the region.

- Environmentalists have expressed concerns that the expansion could induce growth south of White Rock Road, which is aligned with the route of the future regional highway linking El Dorado County and Elk Grove. They would like to see some mitigation.

City officials say that after annexation, the area to the south of the new city boundary would remain in the county and, as such, they have no control.

As those issues are sorted out, city officials are eager to enjoy the results of a long planning process.

"I believe this sets the stage for Folsom's future for the next 25 years," Mayor Jeffrey Starsky said in an interview. "It brings us closer to what we all want – a little bit of a recession-proof city."

The area includes 1,000 acres of open space and wetland corridors and another 120 acres of neighborhood parks.

A contract for water already has been negotiated with the Natomas Central Mutual Water Co. A new pipeline from the Sacramento regional water facility in Freeport will be paid for by the residents of the expansion area.

The development puts an emphasis on transit, both locally and regionally; and it will allow for expansion of the city's bike and hiking trail system south of Highway 50.

The site would be a regional destination for shopping and entertainment, offer up to 13,000 jobs in retail, and more than 10,000 new residences in a range of housing types.

The project was built around smart-growth principles adopted by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and its Blueprint, a plan aimed at reducing impacts on the environment by avoiding leapfrog development.

Mike McKeever, head of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, said he had yet to study the plan's final details.

But he offered a rare public pat on the back to its makers.

"The news is generally good," McKeever said, noting that city planners have remained consistent with Blueprint principles in shaping the area's future.

That includes integrating land use and transportation effectively, designing a system that can accommodate bus rapid transit both inside and beyond the expansion area, and locating medium-density housing nearby to minimize vehicle use.

Ardie Zahedani, principal with the RCH Group representing landowners in the area, said if annexation is approved next May, development of the site could begin in summer 2011.

There are seven landowners in the area, but three own perhaps 90 percent of the land: AKT Development, Easton Development and the Carpenter Ranch group.

Folsom already is a desirable address in the region, Zahedani said, and the design of the growth area will enhance that.

Mayor Starsky noted that Folsom's expansion is to begin with strong employers already in the community, giving the city an edge over Elk Grove. That city struggled to advance its 1,900-acre Laguna Ridge development once the real estate market spiraled downward.

"We started from a different base," Starsky said. The city has attracted and seems largely able to keep companies like Intel, Micron, Kaiser, Cal ISO, he said.

"We have a base of companies here," he said. "Many of them are looking to expand."

Environmentalists, however, worry that urban expansion won't end at White Rock Road, which would become the city's new southern boundary.

The biggest issue identified by the Environmental Council of Sacramento is that Folsom's plan doesn't propose to mitigate its growth-inducing effects on the oak woodlands to the south of White Rock Road, said Rob Burness, an ECOS board member.

"Does anyone doubt that the development of a four-lane White Rock Road with urban density development on its north side would *not* induce growth south of White Rock?" Burness asked in an e-mail. Decades of experience throughout the region, he said, prove otherwise.

But city officials say it's not their issue.

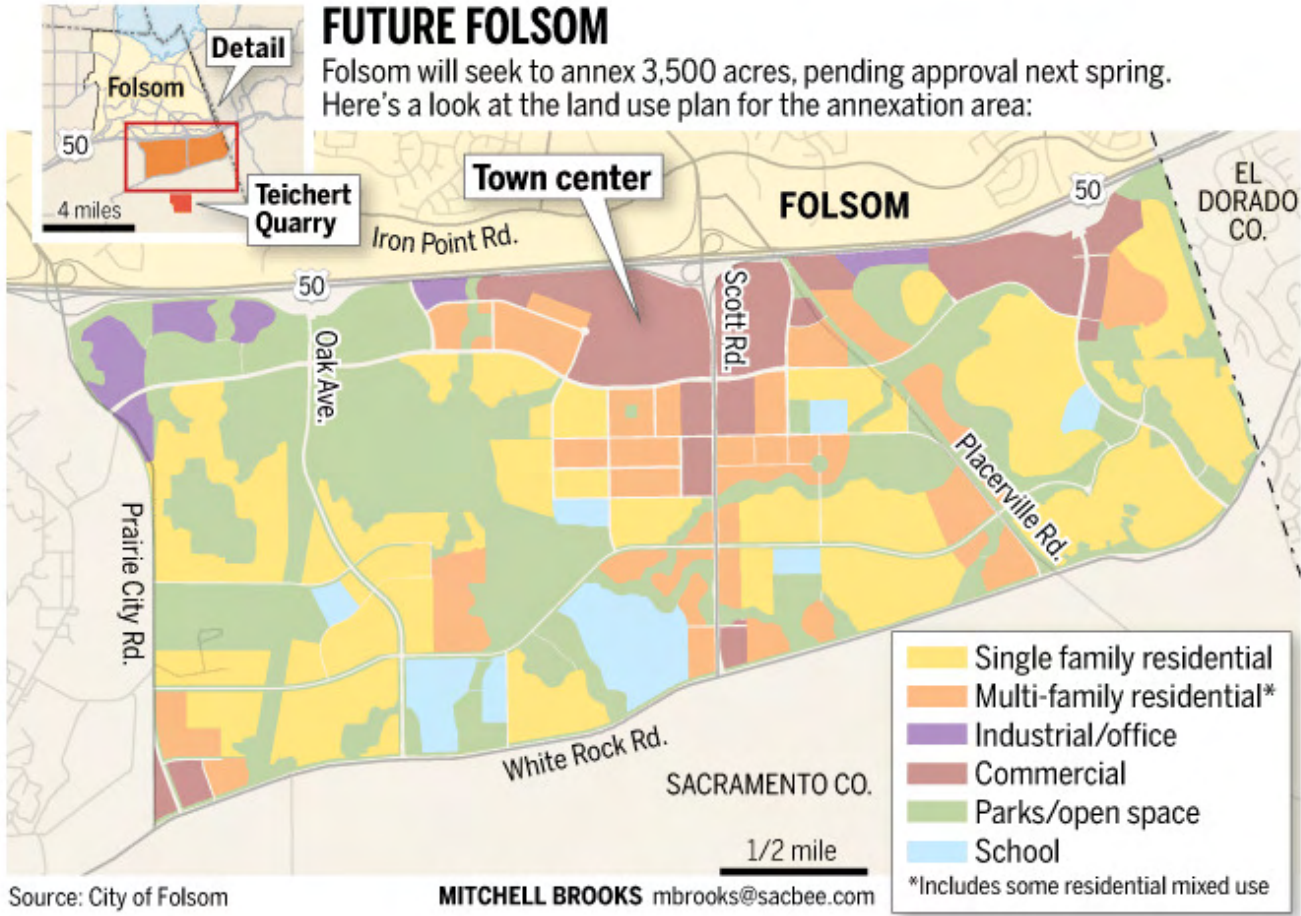
"We don't control the growth out there," said Evert Palmer, the city's assistant city manager and administrative services director. "We've heard the sensitivities about expansion south of White Rock Road. But I don't know that what we're proposing ... either promotes it or prevents it."

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FUTURE FOLSOM

Folsom will seek to annex 3,500 acres, pending approval next spring. Here's a look at the land use plan for the annexation area:



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