Two public meetings were held on August 7, 2019, to present information, answer questions, and receive comments from the public about a Feasibility Study currently underway within the City of Merced. The same information was presented at each meeting. Approximately 50 people attended the 3 p.m. meeting and approximately 28 persons attended the 6 p.m. meeting. About half of the people in each meeting had not attended the first set of community meetings in May 2019.

The presentations included information about the purpose of the North Merced Feasibility Study and provided information about what is planned to be addressed in the Study. Public input and comments about thoughts and items to consider in preparing content for the Study were requested. City staff and consultants preparing the Feasibility Study responded to questions and comments expressed by meeting participants, as did a representative from the Merced County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

It is important to note that there are no formal development proposals or requests for annexation for the Study area pending before the City. The purpose of the Study is to provide information to assist the City of Merced in decision-making should it receive requests.

The area for which possible future incorporation into City boundaries (annexation) and future growth would be considered is located north of the City’s existing boundaries and contains approximately 7,600 acres currently located within the County of Merced. The area is generally near UC Merced and is mostly rural, but has some existing housing development and some limited businesses in addition to the University campus.

The City designated the northern area for future urban growth in its adopted General Plan. The City anticipates future needs for new housing, retail and commercial businesses, and infrastructure improvements (such as roadways and water and sewer systems).
Annexation or other forms of growth could potentially involve all or only portions of the northern area. Existing residences and businesses may or may not be included in an annexation boundary depending upon where, when and how an annexation is initiated by landowners within the area. The City has stated that if existing residents and businesses were included in a proposed annexation area, they could retain flexibility in existing property uses, but potentially could be required in certain circumstances to connect to and participate in funding City-provided water and sewer service depending upon if, when and which parts of the area might be annexed.

The Study will identify possible future options for how and where future annexations might occur and identify types of City services that might be needed for such annexation options. Should the City receive formal requests for annexation or other forms of growth, there are specific and separate approval processes that must be followed including City approvals and subsequent approvals by LAFCO.

A significant number of participants in both sessions were owners of single family homes in existing subdivisions. Other landowners, other interested individuals, City staff, City consultants, and the LAFCO Executive Director were also present.

The following summary of comments is consolidated from input provided at both meetings. A number of comments and questions reflected concerns about the annexation process and expressed general opposition to their properties being annexed. Responses to topics/comments are briefly summarized as shown in italics below.

- There were several questions/comments asking about the City and LAFCO roles in the annexation process, the annexation process itself, who has ability to initiate annexation, how potentially affected residents/landowners/registered voters are notified and how individuals can participate in the process. (Any landowner in the area could request annexation. If an annexation proposal is received, it legally must be considered by the City. The City may or may not approve the proposal. If the City does approve the proposal, it must also then be approved by LAFCO in a separate process, including notification to property owners within the proposed annexation boundary. Currently no annexation proposals have been submitted. The process for protesting annexations was reviewed and included in the meeting presentation. The “Annexation Questions and Answers” document on the City’s Feasibility Study web page is being updated to include this information).

- Comments were made that the City shouldn’t grow because groundwater supplies are limited and may not be able to support new growth without adversely affecting existing groundwater users. (Comments are noted. Analysis of groundwater impacts from new development are evaluated before development occurs. The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act was discussed as an additional tool/regulation for maintaining groundwater sustainability).

- There were questions about costs for annexation, potential increases in property taxes, and costs for connecting to City systems and services. (Comments are noted and being considered in preparing the Feasibility Study. Please also see the “Annexation Questions and Answers” document on the City’s Feasibility Study web page).

- Concerns were expressed about the possible need to expand the City’s wastewater treatment plant capacity and related costs, and availability of sewer collection capacity (Comments are noted. Both issues are being examined in more detail and will be reported as part of the Feasibility Study – the comments were based on the preliminary analysis of wastewater treatment plant capacity issues that was presented at the meetings).
Questions were asked about the projections and assumptions used to forecast future needs for new residential and non-residential development in the City (including the Study Area). (Comments were noted and the sources of the projections were discussed with the primary source being the Merced County Association of Governments).

Concerns were raised about if and how concerns of meeting participants would be reflected in the Feasibility Study. (The comments were noted. As part of the discussion, it was communicated that the community meeting materials, sign-in sheets, comment sheets, and meeting summaries, along with a summary of the overarching themes of public input from the meetings will be included in the Feasibility Study and considered in evaluating future growth and annexation options and pathways in the Study area).

Concerns were expressed about potential annexation and future growth and impacts on quality of life, and about desire to maintain rural lifestyle and not have City density/intensity in the area. (Comments are noted and will be considered in preparing recommendations in the Feasibility Study).

There were questions about types of changes that could be required of existing property owners in the area related to water and septic requirements, whether existing residences would be required to connect to City services with annexation, and whether existing properties could remain on wells and septic systems. (In general, should there be annexation of all or parts of the northern area, existing properties can retain wells and septic as is. An exception may be if there is a system failure on the property. Need for a replacement permit could potentially require a property owner to hook into a City system if a City system is available at that time. For additional information, please read the document entitled “Annexation Questions and Answers” shown on the City’s Feasibility Study web page).

The next opportunity for public input to the Feasibility Study process is planned in November/December 2019 at a joint Planning Commission/City Council workshop. The intent of the workshop is to present and discuss preliminary findings for growth options and issues for the Study area should the analysis proceed to the point that such information can be presented at that time. Landowners and registered voters will be sent a notice of the meeting date, location and planned topics and the notice will be published and posted on the Feasibility Study website. Questions and comments from the public will be welcomed.