

**CITY OF MERCED**  
**Planning & Permitting Division**

**STAFF REPORT:** #14-14

**AGENDA ITEM:** 4.2

**FROM:** Kim Espinosa,  
Planning Manager

**PLANNING COMMISSION**  
**MEETING DATE:** Oct. 22, 2014

**PREPARED BY:** Bill King, AICP,  
Principal Planner

**CITY COUNCIL**  
**MEETING DATE:** To be scheduled

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**SUBJECT:** Adoption of the *Bellevue Community Plan* and certification of Addendum (ERC# 11-15) to the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* Environmental Impact Report (SCH#2008071069), and **General Plan Amendment #14-02**, initiated by the City of Merced. The *Bellevue Community Plan* contains several elements including Vision and Urban Design, Mobility, Open Space, Conservation and Recreation, Community Character (Land Use), Urban Expansion, Public Services and Facilities, and Plan Maintenance that will be used by the City to guide future growth within the City's Sphere of Influence for approximately 2.4 square miles generally bounded by G Street on the west; Farmland Avenue on the north; Lake Road on the east and Cardella Road on the South (between Lake Road and Gardner Road), and generally ½ mile south of Bellevue Road (between Gardner Road and G Street). \*PUBLIC HEARING\*

**ACTION:** PLANNING COMMISSION:

Recommendation to City Council

- 1) Certification of the Environmental Review #11-15 (Addendum to an Environmental Impact Report, SCH#2008071069);
- 2) General Plan Amendment #14-02; and,
- 3) Adoption of the *Bellevue Community Plan*

CITY COUNCIL:

Approve/Disapprove/Modify

- 1) Certification of the Environmental Review #11-15 (Addendum to an Environmental Impact Report, SCH#2008071069);
- 2) General Plan Amendment #14-02; and,
- 3) Adoption of the *Bellevue Community Plan*

## **SUMMARY**

Urban development pressure is growing in the northeast section of the City's growth area. The siting of the UC Merced Campus, combined with the forecasted dramatic population increase in California's Central Valley, and the continued northern growth of the City of Merced, all point to the expectation of future growth. This expectation is reflected in several long-range planning efforts including UC Merced's 2020 Plan, the University Community Plan, planning for Yosemite Lake Estates, as well as recent development interests within the City in response to continued growth at the UC campus. The presence of sewer and water lines in Bellevue Road, and need for expanded roads to service growth of the campus, are concrete signs of financial resources being expended in response to growth.

There is a growing demand to provide shovel-ready projects that will respond to the growing market for housing and services. With these projects is the responsibility for the City to assure adequate public services and facilities in a manner that is sustainable in terms of the capacity of the environment and the fiscal solvency of the community. The Merced City Council recognized these needs, and as part of the adoption of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, identified the need to prepare a community plan in the area west of UC Merced along Bellevue Road prior to review of annexation requests. The *Bellevue Community Plan* can be an important tool for the community to bridge the goal to enable shovel-ready projects with the community values noted above. The need and function of this tool is evident on several levels, including the land use entitlement process, infrastructure services, and quality neighborhoods and jobs.

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* anticipated the development of the *Bellevue Community Plan*, and provided much conceptual direction to help shape it. This foundation enabled the community plan to be strongly consistent with the City's General Plan, which translates to a relatively uncomplicated environmental review and limited amendments to the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*. This report is comprised of three sections related to the recommended actions to: 1) provide a recommendation on the Community Plan; 2) to review and provide a recommendation on proposed amendments to the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*; and, 3) to review and provide a recommendation concerning the environmental assessment of the plan.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Planning staff recommends that the Planning Commission recommend that the City Council adopt the *Bellevue Community Plan* (Enclosure 1) including the recommended changes identified by the Bellevue Community Plan Ad-Hoc Advisory Committee, approve General Plan Amendment #14-02 (Attachment A), and certify the Addendum (Environmental Review #11-15) to the Environmental Impact Report (SCH#2008071069) of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* (Enclosure 2) per the Draft Resolution at Attachment B.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The *Bellevue Community Plan* study area, consisting of 2.4 square miles, is located outside but adjacent to the Merced City limits, and within the City's planned growth area, otherwise known as the Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP) and Sphere of Influence (SOI). The *Bellevue Community Plan* (BCP or Plan) provides policy direction to the decision making process for development within a defined geographic portion of the Planning area of the City's *General Plan*. The plan forms a broad framework for mutual understanding among citizens, public agencies, and the development community.

The BCP establishes a high-level planning framework that strikes a balance between certainty and flexibility by anchoring key land uses while allowing their size to adapt to changing market conditions in response to economic growth and the expansion of UC Merced. While the BCP provides a broad range of uses and densities that could occur throughout the plan area, it emphasizes the foundational building blocks of street connectivity, functional mobility choices, active and passive recreation open space corridors and bikeways, gateway street designs, and attractive business park settings to create a great sense of place with investment certainty.

The BCP is a framework and a set of principles/strategies to help the City expand in a more fiscally sustainable manner and to manage a number of "critical uncertainties" to increase the chances of building an interconnected set of valuable pedestrian and transit-oriented places over a long time. Through the neighborhood master planning process as described in Chapter 5, the BCP is geared to make projects that are connected to their neighbors and to the transit spine with complete, walkable streets, so the City creates a systematic development where the next development is framed by the preceding development site, and the City is not left with a smattering of projects, but rather the development of a vision. The BCP includes several elements, including:

- "Vision and Urban Design,"
- "Mobility,"
- "Open Space, Conservation and Recreation,"
- "Community Character (Land Use),"



- “Urban Expansion,”
- “Public Services and Facilities,” and,
- “Plan Maintenance.”

NOTE: Appendix A of the BCP (Enclosure 1) summarizes these chapter elements and their consistency with the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*.

The BCP does not rezone or annex property. Upon adoption of the Plan, properties within the planning area will remain in Merced County and will retain their current county zoning designations. As there is no City zoning within the plan boundaries, the BCP effort does not affect current property rights. The BCP provides a foundation for future development in a manner that will benefit the property owners and the community.

The BCP is not a development project. A development project contains specific land-use entitlements with specific standards. As with the City’s General Plan, the BCP is a conceptual framework within which future decisions about development projects would be made when more information is in place. The BCP does not include the specificity or rigidity that comes with a development plan as does, for example, the *Bellevue Ranch Master Development Plan*.

The BCP is not a project that will annex unincorporated properties into the City of Merced. That action occurs through a separate process usually initiated by private property owners with specific development interests, and then only after a formal annexation request is granted by both the City of Merced and the Merced County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

## **BACKGROUND**

The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* includes an illustrative plan of the study area along with guidelines to help craft a community plan west of UC Merced. A grant award to prepare the plan was made in January 2011, a contract with the State grantor became effective in August 2011, and a project consultant began work in February 2012. Both Mary Ward and then Carol McCoy of the Planning Commission were members of the project’s citizen-based advisory committee, who recommended that the draft plan be adopted along with some amendments (see Finding F), which staff supports. The Planning Commission’s recommendations will be forwarded to the Merced City Council for their consideration and action.

Upon adoption, the BCP will remain a stand-alone policy document that supplements the City’s General Plan. By reference, it will be a part of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*. The City should begin the process to integrate the BCP with existing master plan documents and processes, including but not limited to, the following:

- City of Merced 2013 Bicycle Transportation Plan.
- 2003 Parks and Recreation Master Plan.
- Capital Improvement Planning.
- Public Utility Master Plans.

- Transit Planning Documents.
- Regional Transportation Plans (as appropriate).
- City of Merced Standard Design Manual.

### **Community Input**

The BCP was crafted by a professional planning consultant with considerable input from City Planning Staff, a technical advisory committee, and other interested government agencies such as UC Merced Physical Planning Design and Construction, Merced County Planning and Community Development, and the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG). A significant amount of public outreach occurred during the planning process, which captured community input in ways that guided the drafting of the community plan.

Collaboration among parties whose interests could be affected by future development near and within the plan study area was encouraged through public workshops, stakeholder meetings, and a series of public meetings with an ad-hoc citizen advisory committee. The Merced City Council appointed this Committee, which met 9 times during the planning period. Their involvement resulted in increased public awareness and a reflection of community issues, concerns, and new perspectives on future development opportunities in the plan area.

Appendix F of the *Bellevue Community Plan* includes a detailed description of plan development process and the community participation program that helped shape it.

### **FINDINGS/CONSIDERATIONS:**

#### **Consistency with the Merced Vision 2030 General Plan**

- A. The BCP was developed to be consistent with the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, and is highly reflective of its policies, illustrative plans and guiding features, such as providing significant employment generating uses that would benefit from being in close proximity to the UC Merced campus.
  
- B. Similar to a general plan, a community plan addresses broad planning parameters, but for a smaller geographic area of a community's growth area, and also addresses issues specific to that sub-area of the general plan in a programmatic manner. As discussed in Appendix A of the BCP, the *Bellevue Community Plan* is crafted consistent with the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, and reflects several guiding aspects of the City's General Plan, listed below. Development of the plan was guided by the following inputs (all described in detail in BCP Chapter 1 – Introduction):
  - The City's adopted Guiding Principles for local community plans (Section 3.7.2, *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*);
  - The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* (Section 3.7.4) identified several key features and related direction for the BCP, including: economic development, land use, transportation, public facilities, environment and urban design;

- The Bellevue Corridor Community Plan “Illustrative Plan;” and,
- Several assumptions and the assessment of opportunities and constraints regarding anticipated future conditions.

The BCP also implements the goals of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* and integrates with other planning efforts in the community, specifically:

- The Merced Loop Road,
- Research and Development Sites,
- Preservation of Downtown Cultural Center,
- The City of Merced Transit Corridor ; and,
- UC Merced Gateway District.

- C. *Bellevue Corridor Illustrative Plan:* Section 3.7.4 of the General Plan is a narrative statement describing the vision of this community plan area. Regarding land use, it describes the need for a variety of housing types, a mix of land uses in a vibrant setting, and for commercial sites to be located in nodes, as opposed to strip-commercial. The land use concepts of this vision were supported in the General Plan through the establishment of an “Illustrative Plan” titled, “Bellevue Corridor Community Plan.” While some variation from the “Illustrative Plan” is to be expected, it anchored several key concepts, including: 1) provision of a mixed-use corridor between G Street and Lake Road in the vicinity of Bellevue Road; 2) low density land uses on either side of the mixed use corridor to blend with these existing or planned uses to the north and south; 3) reservation of a large area of land for anticipated jobs-based research and development parks; and, 4) connectivity to adjacent neighborhoods and UC Merced.
- D. The “*Character Type Plan*” (Chapter 5, page 91) of the *Draft Bellevue Community Plan* is grounded in the *Bellevue Corridor Illustrative Plan*, containing all key concepts anchored by it. A comparative assessment of the land uses in these plans is provided for in Table “A-7” in Appendix A of the BCP (Enclosure 1), and reveals substantial consistency between the total number of dwelling units and employees. The increase in the number of employees from an estimate of 8,989 (Illustrative Plan) to 10,967 (BCP), corresponds to the General Plan policy that seeks to provide opportunities for future jobs-based land uses near UC Merced. Potential expansion areas are denoted in the BCP as light blue (Research and Development), and light red (Mixed Use). These areas are not represented in the aforementioned table, and further environmental assessment would be necessary for such growth in these areas.
- E. *BCP Policy Development:* In furtherance of building consistency with the City’s *General Plan*, BCP-specific policies were developed to offer a greater degree of guidance as to the meaning and application of adopted General Plan goals and policies. Technical Appendix D of Environmental Review #11-15 reveals the strong alignment of BCP policies with the goals and policies of the General Plan, and the foundation upon which new policies were written to apply specifically to the BCP.

### **Bellevue Community Plan Ad-hoc Advisory Committee Recommendation**

- F. A draft BCP was crafted after considerable review and input was received from the project's citizen-based advisory committee. At their meeting of August 25, 2014, the Committee unanimously recommended approval of the draft BCP, along with amendments to the July 2014 draft that is included as Enclosure 1 to this report. These amendments are:
1. Remove Figure 3, the BCCP Illustrative Plan, from page 84, Introduction Chapter.
  2. Throughout the community plan, refer to the urban design of the BCP as "Bellevue Urban Design," distinguishing it from the urban village concept of the City's General Plan.
  3. Implementation Policy: City Staff to evaluate use of collector roads spaced every 1/3 mile along Bellevue Road (instead of 1/4 mile spacing), between G Street and Golf Road and Mandeville Lane and Farmland Avenue, considering issues related to terrain and the function of collector roads.
  4. Remove Appendix C from the BCP (but use in the Environmental Document to describe plan consistency).

### **General Plan Amendments**

- G. The *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* identified the need for a community plan to be developed in the project area. The proposed *Bellevue Community Plan* followed the lead of the General Plan, described in detail in the Introduction Chapter of the BCP. While following these leads, the BCP also refined them by adding detail, clarity, and adjustments in a manner that is consistent with the General Plan's programmatic description of future growth in the subject area. Recommended amendments to the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* are described below, and Attachment A depicts the actual changes and updates to General Plan text and images.

#### ***Land Use***

1. By direct reference to the BCP, identify land use designations specific to the BCP area.
2. Change the name of the plan from *Bellevue Corridor Community Plan* to *Bellevue Community Plan*.
3. Amend text in the General Plan to describe the urban design qualities within the BCP plan area.
4. Provide a summary description of the BCP, its relationship to the General Plan, and where it is located.

### ***Circulation***

1. Identify Mandeville Lane, not Bellevue Road, as the City's east-west Transit Corridor to UCM.
  2. Include by reference, the street cross-section designs of the BCP.
  3. Include a notation in the Circulation Element that the number of through travel lanes for specific roads within the BCP should be determined by subsequent traffic studies.
- H. California case law has found that any decision on a General Plan Amendment should be supported by findings of fact. These findings are the rationale for making a decision either to approve or deny an amendment to the City's General Plan.
1. *The proposed amendment is in the public interest and is consistent and compatible with the rest of the General Plan.* See Finding I of the "Environmental Review" section below for details.
  2. *The potential effects of the proposed amendment have been evaluated and have been determined not to be detrimental to the public health, safety, or welfare.* The *Bellevue Community Plan* relies on the adopted Safety Element of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, as it does not contain such element. As found above, the remainder of the plan is consistent and compatible with the rest of the General Plan, and its own efforts to provide for the public health, safety and welfare of the community.
  3. The proposed amendment has been processed in accordance with the applicable provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act and the California Government Code. See Finding J of the "Environmental Review" section below for details.

### **Environmental Review**

- I. *Consistency Review:* The *Bellevue Community Plan* was developed to be consistent with the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*. Evidence of this consistency is found in three areas of the planning effort, namely, (a) guidance provided by the General Plan, which is described in Chapter 1 (Introduction) of the BCP; (b) a plan consistency assessment is presented as Appendix A of the BCP; and, (c) a policy alignment document presented as Attachment D of Env. Rev. #11-15 (Enclosure 2).
- J. *Environmental Clearance:* The Planning staff conducted an environmental review of the project in accordance with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and found that although the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment, because all potentially significant effects: (a) have been analyzed adequately in the General Plan EIR SCH#2008071069 (Enclosure 3) pursuant to



applicable standards; (b) have been avoided or mitigated pursuant to that earlier EIR; and, (c) no substantial changes to the project are proposed, no substantial changes occur with respect to the circumstances under which the project is undertaken, and no new information of substantial importance has been identified, no further assessment is required. The changes described in Section III of this project's Expanded Initial Study (Env. Rev #11-15) are not substantial as they do not trigger any of the conditions necessitating preparation of a subsequent or supplemental EIR; therefore, no additional environmental document beyond this Addendum is necessary to evaluate the environmental effects of the *Bellevue Community Plan*. Thus, an addendum to Environmental Impact Report (SCH#2008071069) and associated findings have been prepared and is being recommended (see Enclosure 2).

- K. It is important to note that all adopted policies and CEQA-based mitigation measures for the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* apply to the BCP planning area, and that future project-level development proposals are required to comply with CEQA, including the preparation of appropriate environmental assessments and reviews.

Attachments:

- A. Changes to the General Plan text and images
- B. Draft Planning Commission Resolution

Enclosures:

- 1. *Bellevue Community Plan*
- 2. Env. Rev. #11-15, Addendum
- 3. *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* Environmental Impact Report (SCH#2008071069) available on the City of Merced website at:  
[http://www.cityofmerced.org/depts/cd/planning/merced\\_vision\\_2030\\_general\\_plan\\_adoption/default.asp](http://www.cityofmerced.org/depts/cd/planning/merced_vision_2030_general_plan_adoption/default.asp)  
(scroll to items 03, 04, 05, and 06)