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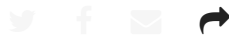
## OPINION AND COMMENTARY

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EDITORIALS

## *Our View: Reasons not to develop Wood Colony*

UPDATED JANUARY 20, 2014 1:46 PM





Orchards line Dakota Avenue in the heart of Wood Colony; there used to be similar trees in parts of Modesto that are now covered with houses.  
*The Modesto Bee*



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Some members of the Modesto City Council and their friends at the Chamber of Commerce have tried to depict their desire to include Wood Colony on the city's general plan as an either-or situation. Either designate the 1,800 acres of prime farmland as future business parks, or the city will run out of jobs.

Why frame it in such stark terms? Because if they don't, the public is unlikely to embrace this bad plan.

We do not believe Wood Colony is the city's only option for attracting good jobs. Here are some reasons we feel the council should look elsewhere to expand the city.

**DISTANT HORIZONS** – Council members say business parks being envisioned along Kiernan Avenue could be built long before the city would develop Wood Colony. Putting business parks along Kiernan makes sense despite the fact that it will cover farmland that's even better than that in Wood Colony. Why? Because if the long-awaited north county corridor ever becomes reality, business parks from Salida to Riverbank to Oakdale will have a direct link to Highway 99. That direct link, by the way, will be a lot more likely if county residents pass a transportation tax in the near future.

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Even if development in Wood Colony is a decade or more into the future, is that supposed to placate families who have lived on the land for four or five generations? If development is that far off, there should be ample time to identify and develop other suitable alternatives. Embracing Dave Cogdill Jr.'s call for a general plan update would be a good first step.

**PLOW-READY** – It's absolutely true there isn't much "shovel-ready" land in Modesto. And many angry residents have pointed to vacant retail space throughout the city as alternatives. But even vacant big-box stores won't work for a large, industrial facility. They're too small and traffic would be a nightmare. Still, designating Wood Colony for eventual development won't add a square inch of ready-to-build land to the city's current portfolio. Instead of being shovel-ready a decade from now, this land is plow-ready today.

Meanwhile, the soils east of Modesto are not nearly as rich and don't produce the same kinds of highly valuable crops. More visionary leaders have talked about putting business parks and houses on that land for decades, as Riverbank and Oakdale have done. Using land east of Modesto would probably be less costly than land in Wood Colony without incurring the losses in agricultural productivity.

Perhaps the city could talk to Riverbank and Oakdale officials to see how they did it.

**WHAT KIND OF JOBS?** – Proponents say Wood Colony's proximity to Highway 99 makes it perfect for future employers. But what kind of employers insist on being located along a major highway? The answer is obvious: transportation-based and logistics companies. We would never want to turn away such jobs, but warehouses do not offer the high-paying work our civic leaders say they want to attract.

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Experts project the fastest growing occupations over the next 10 years to be health care services, research (perhaps for food companies), computer design and construction. Such businesses are not dependent on easy highway access. And though we would never mock City Council members for being dedicated to finding “jobs, jobs, jobs,” we must note that not all jobs are created equal. Is the job of farmer less important than that of a truck-stop cashier?

**FOLLOW THE MONEY** - Commercial land sales generate commissions of roughly 5 percent, according to industry sources. While good farmland might go for \$50,000 an acre, 10 years from now an acre of industrial property will likely fetch at least \$350,000, probably more. Conservatively, the sale of 1,500 acres would generate commissions of \$26 million. You can follow the money all the way from Wood Colony back to Modesto. We applaud anyone who can make a profit, but you can take a commission on eastside properties, too.

**ASPHALT IS NOT INEVITABLE** - Those who want to see business parks west of Highway 99 say that someday those farms will all become businesses or houses, just as farms along McHenry, Pelandale and Coffee roads have all disappeared. And we recognize the truth in the saying that most farmers are just developers wearing coveralls. But property owners in Wood Colony have resisted the siren call of easy money for, oh, 110 years and created some of the best-tended and most productive farms in the area.

There's no reason to expect their hearts to change.

**GOOD NEIGHBORS** - This issue has generated a flood of letters, heated community meetings and alternately irritated or dismayed City Council members. Nearby, the city is fighting with Salida about joining Modesto. If the city proceeds with its plan to include Wood Colony in its general plan, it will likely create enemies on two fronts.



**GET A NEW PLAN** – It's true that Modesto needs more land for industry. A new general plan will help identify the most suitable land for that purpose. We've joined the chamber and planners in pointing this out for many years and we fully support designating land east, south and north for this purpose.

But more than a decade ago, those trying to envision a viable future for our valley recommended that we save the best soils for farming and put houses and businesses on ground that's not as good. More than a century ago, some industrious families identified the land of Wood Colony as perfect for farming.

Each of those assessments was correct and neither has changed.

This story was originally published January 19, 2014, 12:00 AM.

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2 Viewing

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