

Farmland Working Group

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Leveraging Modesto's competitive advantage starts with smarter land use — a call for fiscal honesty in the general plan

By Trevin W. Barber - Special to The Modesto Bee
Updated January 30, 2026

Modesto is being asked to choose among three land-use alternatives for the 2050 General Plan. On the surface, these options appear to offer different futures: one focused on economic competitiveness, one on balanced growth and one on minimal expansion. But the city's own comparison boards tell a different story.

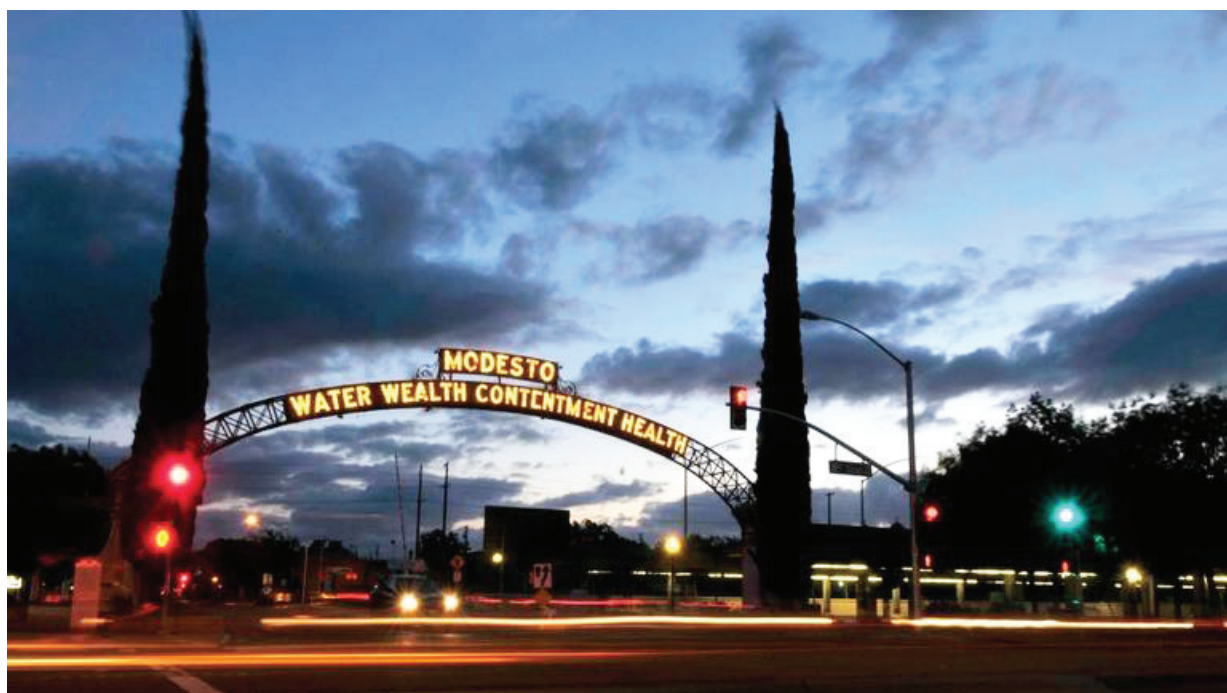
Despite their labels, all three alternatives share the same underlying assumption: that Modesto's future hinges on how much we grow, rather than how well we grow.

That is the wrong focus.

The real issue facing Modesto is not whether we expand faster or slower. It's whether we are willing to design growth that strengthens neighborhoods, improves fiscal health and creates opportunity for every resident. On that front, all three alternatives fall short.

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Each scenario continues the same auto-centric development pattern that has left Modesto with rising infrastructure costs, widening inequities and a structural budget deficit. Whether the city grows outward aggressively, moderately or minimally, the underlying model remains unchanged: spread-out development that forces residents into cars and costs more to maintain than it ever generates in tax revenue.



Modesto's three 2050 General Plan alternatives all keep the same costly, low-density development pattern. Debbie Noda Modesto Bee

Strong Towns and other fiscal analysts have shown that this pattern is financially unsustainable for cities across the country — and Modesto is no exception. Instead of planning to fall off a cliff in five years or a decade, what if we just didn't plan to fall off a cliff?

Shortcomings of three alternatives

While the alternatives differ in tone, they all convert thousands of acres of land for developments from economically productive orchards that actually contribute to Modesto's export economy. Nearly all of this new housing capacity takes the form of high-priced, low-density subdivisions concentrated in North Modesto.

Flooding the market with more of the same does little to address affordability, mobility or equity. It simply expands the city's footprint and deepens the long-term infrastructure liabilities that already strain our budget.

All three alternatives also imply that Modesto must accept a trade-off between growth and economic success — as if expanding outward automatically produces prosperity. This is a false dilemma. But the type of "growth" these

scenarios rely on simply does not deliver the economic outcomes we need.

More industrial land would only attract more low-wage warehousing. It is not economic development; it is land consumption without value creation. Warehousing generates minimal sales tax, offers limited upward mobility and produces far fewer net impacts per acre than the productive agricultural land it replaces.

The alternatives frame a choice between growth and stagnation. In reality, we have to choose between low-value expansion and high-quality economic advancement. Modesto absolutely deserves the latter.

What is lost

Even more concerning is what we lose in the process. The removal of thousands of acres of orchards is not just a land-use decision, it is a direct setback to the region's emerging work with BEAM Circular and the broader effort to build a bio-circular economy for woody biomass.

Orchards are a cornerstone of this regenerative economic model. Their prunings, removals and woody byproducts can be transformed into higher-value materials, renewable products and climate-positive industries. Eliminating

Continued on page 2

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FROM THE CHAIR



EARTH DAY is celebrated each year on April 22. It is a day when Americans recognize the small planet we depend on and human impact on the earth. Non-renewable resources exist in finite amounts and cannot be easily replaced.

Farmland is considered a rapidly disappearing natural resource, California loses 50,000 acres of farmland every year, making its protection essential for long term sustainability.

- ◆ **Sustainability & Infrastructure** — Farmland supports biodiversity, protects water quality in watersheds, and provides open space that can be more fiscally beneficial to local governments than commercial development.
- ◆ Farms also provide critical habitat for local wildlife populations, promoting and protecting biodiversity.



The Proposed River Walk Project: Status

by Jami Aggers

The Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed River Walk Project in the Riverbank area of Stanislaus County would involve the conversion of approximately 1,000 acres of prime agricultural land into primarily residential units along with commercial development to serve the new community. The project area consists of low-lying flood plain land which is actively farmed currently and has been in one type of agricultural production or another since at least the 1950's.

The Draft EIR was released in early 2024 and comments were due in May of that year. Over 100 comment letters were received from agencies and members of the public. The Final EIR for the project must address each of the comments received and is anticipated to be released at any time. Once it is posted, the time frame to comment will be brief as it will rather quickly advance to the Riverbank Planning Commission, and then to the City Council for consideration shortly thereafter. If the project is approved following a Public Hearing, it will necessitate a General Plan change/amendment, as the area is not currently zoned for residential and commercial development, and it is also not currently part of the City's Sphere of Influence (SOI) which is the area within which the City has been previously approved to grow/annex.

Ultimately, the final approval will lie with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO; a 5-member Commission comprised of city, county and public members) which is where

city SOI/boundary changes occur, if approved. Applications for SOI/boundary changes must be accompanied by a Municipal Services Review document which demonstrates that a city has the necessary existing services (water, sewer, police, fire, etc.) that would be needed to serve the area. Riverbank's most recent SOI expansion occurred in 2016 when 1,500 acres was added primarily for the Crossroads West development/expansion. The River Walk project proposes to add an additional 1,500 acres to the City's SOI by expanding north to the Stanislaus River and West to McHenry Avenue to accommodate the River Walk project and take in additional parcels that are currently zoned agriculture.



Continued from page 1

this feedstock at scale undermines one of Modesto's most promising innovation pathways and weakens our long-term economic resilience.

Replacing productive orchards with low-yield subdivisions is not "emerging economic opportunity." It is the egregious plundering of one of Modesto's most strategic competitive advantages.

What does better growth look like?

Better growth means designing neighborhoods where people can meet daily needs without long car trips. It means focusing on infill and reinvestment in existing communities rather than pushing the city's edges farther into farmland. It means creating walkable, mixed-use districts that support small businesses, reduce household transportation costs and generate more revenue per acre for the city.

Better growth means addressing inequities that have persisted for decades. Many Modesto neighborhoods lack safe sidewalks, parks, shade and access to services, yet the alternatives offer little more than a continuation of the status quo.

Finally, better growth means adopting strong design standards that reflect the realities of a Central Valley city. Modesto's tree canopy is far below state and national averages, and many neighborhoods lack shade entirely. A forward-looking General Plan would require minimum tree-canopy coverage for all new development, heat-resilient street design, parking-lot shade requirements that actually produce shade and incentives for retrofitting existing neighborhoods with trees and cooling infrastructure.

Modesto deserves a General Plan that is honest about these challenges and bold enough to propose solutions. That means shifting the conversation away from "How much should we grow?" and toward "How do we grow well?"

For more information go to: <https://gp2050.modestogov.com/documents/>



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Organizations Opposed to the River Walk Project



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