An Urban Morphology of Fresno, California: Its Structure and Growth

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An Urban Morphology of Fresno, CA:
Its Structure and Growth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

“A city is born when people decide to live, work and build together in one area. The nature of a city is determined by the characteristics of its people, the land on which they settle and the way they build their city, based on their history, culture and economy.”¹ To better comprehend the complexities of present development, as well as project future development, one must explore a city’s past. This paper seeks to examine the past growth of the city of Fresno as a means to understanding its current form.

The city of Fresno is located at the center of the San Joaquin Valley in California, which spans from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in the north to the Tehachapi Mountains in the south. The valley is a broad, flat land that lies between the Coast Ranges in the west and the Sierra Nevada Range in the east. It has a semiarid climate, including a hot, dry summer and mild, occasionally moist, winter with an average of 10.85 inches of annual

Figure 1. Location of Fresno with respect to California and other large cities.

precipitation.\textsuperscript{2}

Fresno is the county seat of Fresno County. The California Department of Finance estimated its population as of January 1, 2009 to be 495,913.\textsuperscript{3} This makes it the fifth largest city in the state as well as the thirty-sixth largest in the nation. However, the US Census Bureau estimated its metropolitan population as of July 1, 2009 to be 915,267, which makes it the sixth largest city in the state and the fifty-fourth largest in the nation by this measure.\textsuperscript{4} With the exception of the city of Clovis, Fresno’s metropolitan area does not include a host of suburbs like many other cities of its size. The dissimilarity results in a wide disparity between its rankings as a city and as a metropolitan area.

In addition, Fresno is the economic hub of the San Joaquin Valley with a strong agricultural base. The region yields much of the state’s agricultural products, especially grapes, cotton, nuts, and citrus fruits. It is also a large milk-producing region with many dairies, particularly in the southern counties of the Valley including Tulare, Kings, and Kern. The American Community Survey reflects the prominence of this sector in the Fresno economy as 8.7 percent of all civilians work in a capacity that serves agriculture, forestry and hunting, or mining, whereas the industry in the nation’s entirety represents

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\end{thebibliography}
only 1.8 percent of the civilian workforce.\textsuperscript{5} The city is also a tourist gateway to Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks with each being within seventy miles to the east.

However, 150 years earlier, Fresno was a starkly different place. The only signs of human settlement had been a series of canals, which a man named Moses Church had built, and a series of wheat fields A.Y. Easterby, a local farmer, had planted, who also had commissioned the construction of the canals, which were necessary for the success of his venture. Incidentally, these signs led to a changing landscape in the region as the canals and fields attracted company surveyors working for the Southern Pacific Railroad. As they came through the San Joaquin Valley establishing stations about every ten miles, they saw these improvements to the land and recommended a site nearby for the construction of such a station to the director, Leland Stanford. After inspecting the area himself, he recognized an opportunity to redirect freight traffic away from the nearby Fresno City, which is unrelated to the city of Fresno, where people used a slough to carry their products northward by water. Furthermore, the canal systems reassured Stanford that the railroad could supply water to its steam-powered locomotives even in the dry conditions of the area. Moreover, the San Joaquin Valley Land Association, which owned 80,000 acres of land in the county, offered three parcels of land, a total of 1,920 acres, free of charge to the Southern Pacific Railroad “for the purpose of locating thereon the Town of Fresno to be made the future capital of the county of Fresno.”\textsuperscript{6} Due to these incentives, Leland Stanford decided to build the station at this site, which he named

\textsuperscript{6} William Monson, “Legends and Other Tales,” 14-15.
Fresno Station.\textsuperscript{7} This depot would become a key driving force for the development of the city that sprouted from its erection over the next half-century.

Table 1. Bureau of the Census Data from the American Community Survey 2006-2008 comparing Fresno with the United States, listing percentage of workers by industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Fresno MSA</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civilian employed population 16 years and over</td>
<td>372,545</td>
<td>143,195,793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and warehousing, and utilities</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services, and health care and social assistance</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services (except public administration)</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Neighborhoods and Communities**

Within Fresno are many informal neighborhoods and communities that have no defined legal boundaries, but whose general location citizens commonly know. Some of these places have become less explicit over time, while others have become better known. In addition, these places can be the size of subdivision or they can be as large as an entire section of the city. Past inhabitants and businesses have defined these areas with their cultural, economic, and social motives, creating unique qualities with which

current inhabitants often replicate. This pattern develops the reputations that identify neighborhoods—leading to sometimes positive and sometimes negative associations.

The most well-known neighborhoods that exist today include the following: Downtown, Lowell-Jefferson, the Tower District, and Fresno City College in the center; Huntington Boulevard aside Arlington Heights and Sunnyside in the east; Mayfair and Fresno State in the northeast; the Old Fig Garden, Pinedale, Van Ness Extension and the San Joaquin River Bluffs, Sierra Sky Park, Woodward Park, and Fort Washington in the north; and the West Side in the west; and Calwa in the south.

Figure 2. Map of prominent neighborhoods and communities found throughout Fresno.
Downtown Fresno is the most easily discerned area in the city as it resides at the heart of a triangle formed by three major freeways, State Route (SR) 99, SR 41, and SR 180. Moreover, as is typical for most downtowns, it has the highest density in the city with several skyscrapers that visually set the area off from others. Contrary to the rest of the city, which is on the national grid axis in a north-south direction, it is on the original railroad grid axis that runs in a northeast-southwest direction. The area within this grid, about three square miles, consists of the earliest development in the city designed around the Southern Pacific Railroad. This placement had inherent benefits for early Downtown Fresno such as ease of access that allowed the area to transform into a
cosmopolitan place with a significant retail and industrial sector in the Valley.

However, downtown is not the retail hub that it once was. Since the 1950s, it has experienced a decline in development outside of limited private projects in the late-1960s and early-1980s constructing mostly hotels, banks, and office space, as well as government-funded projects, the most recent of which include a baseball stadium and a federal courthouse. Fortunately, in conjunction with national trends toward re-urbanization, these projects look to be stirring up real estate developers as they seek to convert older buildings and blocks into mixed-uses, which should bring more residents into the community. Currently, downtown serves one primary function: workspace. As Jane Jacobs, an influential theorist on urban form, wrote,

To generate exuberant diversity in a city’s streets and districts four conditions are indispensable:
1. The district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function; preferably more than two...
2. Most blocks must be short; that is, streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent.
3. The district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones so that they vary in the economic yield they must produce. This mingling must be fairly close-grained.
4. There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there...

Jacobs refers to diversity in the sense of land use over the course of a day, not racial/ethnic diversity. Fresno’s downtown fulfills three of the four points, lacking the first. Downtown consists largely of commercial and government zones. These places buzz with activity from during normal business hours, but are dormant otherwise. Chukchansi Park, the baseball stadium, is the only major draw to the area during the night, but its pull is limited. The Fulton Mall, which city planners had relied upon to

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bring people back to retail downtown for four decades, continues to play a large role in downtown at its very center, but it did not revitalize the area as people had hoped. Future developments that may bring people to reside downtown are intriguing with respect to the future of the city center. In the meantime, mixed events continue to take place around Downtown Fresno. Even as the Fresno Redevelopment Agency works to beautify and revitalize the area, core institutions like the Fresno Metropolitan Museum are going bust in the midst of the economic recession, creating more vacancies and adding more unemployed workers to the already depressed city. In fact, according to the Census Bureau’s 2008 American Community Survey (ACS), Fresno has the third highest poverty rate in the nation amongst the 100 largest metropolitan areas with 21.2 percent of the population living under the poverty level. This fact has many implications including a large strain on social service resources and a small tax base relative to its size, which creates a difficult situation for the area’s local governments. One of the chief issues that results is affordable housing—a subject that has caused much consternation in and around Downtown Fresno.

Two neighborhoods just north of downtown that have felt the weight of this issue are Lowell and Jefferson, collectively known as Lowell-Jefferson. The area developed after 1900 and served as Fresno's first suburb. Single-family housing with mostly two or three bedrooms dominated the area, “serving the working middle and upper middle classes. This popular area had two elementary schools and its tree-lined streets.

Figure 5. Map of Lowell-Jefferson.
and proximity to downtown made this neighborhood pleasant and appealing.” Yet, planners and engineers had struck the community with blight in the same fatal blow as they constructed SR 180 freeway through it. This pushed the community into a decayed state and as housing went into disrepair, the area became a destination for low-income and often unstable families, who did not have the means to turn the community around. However, the Fresno Redevelopment Agency is spending $11 million from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program in order to prevent blight by purchasing homes in Lowell-Jefferson and South Tower District, renovating them, and reselling them as affordable housing for stable homebuyers in the low and moderate-income brackets.

The Tower District is an urban district that developed and evolved as a residential suburb with the introduction of the Fresno streetcar system of the early twentieth century. The streetcar brought an assortment of different buildings into the neighborhood and as the property values rose, the density and diversity of the neighborhood became more distinct. Commercial development followed this growth throughout the Tower District, but particularly along Olive Avenue. In 1939, the Tower Theatre, from

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which the neighborhood takes its name, was built—it is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In the middle of the twentieth century, the area decayed though, but the City chose not to redevelop the district with the same fervor as it had downtown. As a result, its original urban form endured through the period. In the late 1970s, the locale began to recover from its decayed state as an influx of independent shops and restaurants took up residence. In the late-1980s, citizens took an active stance to protect the neighborhood’s character from becoming compromised. This movement manifested itself in 1991, when the Tower District set up a specific plan through the Fresno Planning Division of the Development Department protecting its individuality and charm. The neighborhood “blossomed into an important cultural center of the metropolitan area.”¹¹ The district has a unique atmosphere found nowhere else in the city, attracting young people, including college students from the nearby Fresno City College, as a center for the performing arts, antique shops, bookstores, and coffeehouses.

The Fresno City College neighborhood, about one half mile north of the Tower District, has a residential neighborhood that synchronizes well with its surroundings. It consists of homes that many professors have lived in on streets associated with premier universities such as Cambridge, Yale, Harvard, and Cornell.¹² Fresno High School is one block to the west of

the college, the two educational institutions as well as Hamilton Elementary School dominate the area. Although the area is not wealthy, it is clean and well-landscaped. It retains the charm from its heyday with tree-lined streets and well-maintained sidewalks. Fresno City College was established in 1910 as the first community college in California on the grounds of what is now Fresno High School—it later moved to its current site which had started as Fresno Normal School and is now Fresno State.13 It continues to exist as the only public community college in the city.

Fresno State, formally known as California State University, Fresno, is the other public school of higher education in the city; it is also the largest university in the city. It is the home of the Bulldog, from whence the infamous Bulldog gang took its name. Fresno State moved to its current location off of Shaw Avenue in east central Fresno in 1956. It has a large farm to the immediate north of the campus, while to the east is the city of Clovis. The major neighborhoods for off-campus housing for students are to the west, Bulldog Village, and to the south, Sun Garden Acres, of the university. Students and staff have nicknamed these neighborhoods ‘Sin City.’ They are typical of student housing with an eclectic mix of low, medium, and high residential zones that include houses and apartment complexes. The Fresno State

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area also includes the eastern portion of Shaw Avenue before entering Clovis city limits. This area has a large number of restaurants as well as the Save Mart Center, which is the school’s arena that hosts most big-name concerts that come to Fresno in addition to college sporting events. Fresno State constructed the arena in 2003, moving their sports teams there from the older Selland Arena in downtown, which they had constructed in 1966.

Cincotta is an unincorporated community two miles south of Fresno State, however, the area is known more for its Mayfair subdivision and its proximity to Fresno-Yosemite International Airport than anything else. Mayfair was the first major subdivision after World War II. It also included the first suburban shopping center in the city that led the exodus from downtown retail.\textsuperscript{14} The neighborhood stands as a relic to early sprawl.

\textsuperscript{14} Clough, 14.
Bordering downtown Fresno to the east are two older neighborhoods known as Huntington Boulevard and Arlington Heights, which grew when streetcar lines began to carry people from the area into downtown and elsewhere throughout the city such as the County Hospital.\textsuperscript{15} They make up the first subdivision in Fresno to be annexed as they were both apart of the Alta Vista Tract.\textsuperscript{16} Huntington Boulevard was the site of the right of way for both the Recreation Line and the Sunnyside Line. It features grandiose homes from the 1910s to the 1930s with examples of Craftsman Bungalow, Italian Renaissance Revival, Colonial Revival, and Spanish Colonial Revival architecture on medium-low residential zones.\textsuperscript{17} Arlington Heights has a collection of much more modest housing from the same period through the 1970s on medium residential zones. The area remains known for its architecture as well as for the Wishon Tree, an eight-story tall redwood that is the “Nation’s Tallest, Living, Lighted and Decorated Christmas Tree.” They represent an area of older wealth in the city, where many prominent residents of the past lived including major business owners and


politicians. Newer wealth has since moved further out into the suburbs and the several unincorporated communities adjacent to and surrounded by the city.

Sunnyside is one of these unincorporated communities at the eastern extent of Fresno. It has two main subsections within it: an older neighborhood where development first took place in which Fresno County controls and a newer neighborhood annexed by the city with the wealthiest cluster of residents that live south of Ashlan Avenue. The community is on the site of where the A.Y. Easterby Banner Ranch had long ago existed. It also contains the original parcels of Temperance Colony that Moses Church sold to settlers under the conditions that they abstain from alcohol and tobacco. Temperance Avenue and Temperance-Kutner Elementary School on Sunnyside’s eastern fringe are legacies to this past, although the substance-free conditions are no longer binding. Similar to many of the other wealthy sections of Fresno, Sunnyside has its own country club, nestled at the middle of the newer part of the community.

19 Rehart, The Valley’s Legends & Legacies, 7, 96.
The Woodward Park and Fort Washington neighborhoods are two of the wealthiest areas of Fresno and are examples of the golf-centric communities found throughout North Fresno. They are low-density residences located in the northernmost corner of the city’s boundaries adjoining Clovis. Developers constructed houses in Woodward Park during the late-1980s and early-to-mid-1990s. The section’s namesake is a regional park and bird sanctuary that resident Ralph Woodward bequeathed to the city in 1968. At 300 acres, it is the largest park in the city. Developers constructed subdivisions in Fort Washington in the 2000s. This area includes subdivisions with McMansions, a manmade lake, and two country clubs. Fort Washington is one of the most newly formed communities. Perhaps these neighborhoods’ biggest draw is the school system, although they are in the city of Fresno, children attend school in the coveted Clovis Unified School District (CUSD). In fact, CUSD has built two of its five high schools in these Fresno neighborhoods.

Van Ness Extension and the San Joaquin River Bluffs, which run along the Herndon Avenue corridor in north Fresno several miles west of Woodward Park, are two other neighborhoods with exceedingly wealthy residents relative to the majority of the city. Most of the Van Ness Extension neighborhood is zoned as low or medium-low residential, while much of the Bluffs are zoned as rural residential. Similar to Fort Washington, Van Ness Extension north of Herndon Avenue and the Bluffs consist of large homes and lots along with a manmade lake, and two country clubs that border the south bank of the San Joaquin River. Van Ness Extension south of Herndon Avenue includes slightly smaller homes, but with similarly large lots. Construction began in the 1950s but picked up speed in the 1970s and 1980s. Neither neighborhood has sidewalks, but the lots contain large, moderately wooded yards that shade the streets.

Neighboring San Joaquin River Bluffs to the west is Sierra Sky Park, an unorthodox community with roads suited for both cars and airplanes. The development
surrounds a landing strip and each house has its own hangar adjacent to its carport. The project began in 1946 and some claim it to be the first of its kind in the world. Street signs are less than two feet tall in order to accommodate planes as they taxi along the streets so that their wings do not incidentally hit such obstacles. In order to reduce noise pollution in the surrounding neighborhoods, planes must follow a strict course over the San Joaquin River in the north.\textsuperscript{21} Sierra Sky Park is small but well known due to its distinction as an aviation community.

Pinedale, which is an unincorporated community in northern Fresno, is significantly less wealthy than the surrounding neighborhoods. It is located between the Woodward Park neighborhood and Van Ness Extension. It consists of largely medium-density residences adjacent to the largest shopping center in the city, River Park. The neighborhood also hosts the only industrial park in the northern sector of the city. Construction of this neighborhood was more sporadic than elsewhere, with over six hundred dwellings built before 1970. Early construction began during World War II, when the area was known as Camp Pinedale. It was used as both an assembly center for soon-to-be-interred Japanese-Americans as well as an army quarters after the government had finished building internment camps to relocate the

\textsuperscript{21}City of Fresno. "Sierra Sky Park Land Use Policy Plan" (plan, City of Fresno, Fresno, CA, September 15, 1998).
Japanese.22 However, the bulk of construction went on during the 1970s and 1980s adding nearly two thousand more units in that period. Today, it retains its own character comparative to the upscale neighborhoods around it and fought for decades to keep its independence from the city, but Fresno finally annexed it over the course of five years from 1974 to 1979.

The Old Fig Garden is an unincorporated community that seeks to remain a part of the county. It rivals Van Ness Extension, the San Joaquin River Bluffs, and Fort Washington as the most upscale neighborhood in the city. Although it began as a rural outlier in 1919, it is now encased near the geographic center of the city.23 Its homeowners association was founded in 1947 with the mission of

\begin{center}
encouraging, protecting and cooperating in the installation, improvement and maintenance of public facilities and utilities, facilities for sanitation and safety, and facilities for education and recreation in said area by encouraging and promoting the improvement of public and private landscaping, the improvement of county roads, streets and highways in said area, and the adoption of zoning ordinances to improve the quality and character of private property and buildings; by assisting and cooperating in the protection of the persons and property of the residents of said area, the regulation of traffic therein, and by promoting and encouraging the establishment of and maintenance of adequate police measures therefore; and by other means as will tend to promote the general welfare of the community.\end{center}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{oldfig_garden.png}
\caption{Map of the Old Fig Garden.}
\end{figure}

22 Clough, 99-100.
23 Rehart, The Valley’s Legends & Legacies, 121.
The neighborhood has its own police protection district through the Fresno County Sheriff’s Office, which allows it to hold votes to levy taxes to provide greater security for its residents. It also has protected itself from city incursions by means of Beautification Ordinances that safeguard its minimum urban standards, which allows it to maintain its traditional large lots with tree-lined streets and no sidewalks, similar to, but more rustic than, the newer Van Ness Extension. These qualities make it one of the most desirable communities in which to live. It hosts an annual Christmas Tree Lane, an event held since 1920 that garners over 100,000 visitors each year as people come to see Christmas displays over a two-mile stretch of Van Ness Boulevard.\(^{25}\)

To the west of the Birmingham Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) that makes up the eastern boundary of the Old Fig Garden is the West Side. Unlike the other communities, the West Side does not correlate with one basic area. It is the infamous section of the city also known as the ‘bad side of town.’ Five major sections of the West Side exist: an area west and south of Downtown on the west side of the Union Pacific Railroad (UP) tracks. This region is known as Southwest Fresno. Directly north of this area is the Jane Addams neighborhood. Chandler Field, a municipal airport—the first in Fresno, separates these two. In addition, Roeding is a neighborhood

\(^{25}\) Fig Garden Homeowners Association, “Christmas Tree Lane,” http://www.oldfig.org/about/christmastreelane.html (accessed January 14, 2010).
in the central western portion of the city, which lies next to the Old Fig Garden to the east. Another community, Figarden, is northwest of Roeding, parallel with the railroad tracks. Unlike the other neighborhoods on the West Side, Roeding and Figarden are on the east side of the UP tracks, but these tracks as well as the BNSF bound them, while the Herndon Canal bisects them. Lastly, there is the Highway City neighborhood, which is partly an unincorporated community as the City of Fresno has annexed its eastern portion. It is located southwest of Figarden on the west side of the UP tracks. The Southwest is the most notorious of these sections of the West Side, which contains the highest crime rates in the city with active gangs including large sects of the Bulldog Gang—a citywide conglomeration of gang members. The neighborhoods are mostly medium to high-density residential zones. Due to the several different neighborhoods in the West Side, its roots as a whole were not set during one particular decade. Southwest Fresno was within the original city limits of Fresno in 1885, while the other areas did not develop until well into the twentieth century. However, they have retained the original stigma that the west side of the railroad tracks had acquired with the establishment of Chinatown and its concentration of licentiousness in its gambling dens, brothels, and saloons.\textsuperscript{26} The area is rampant with many of the social ills from a century earlier, poverty, crime, and drugs.

Finally, to the south is Calwa, the only significant residential area in southern Fresno. It is an unincorporated community whose name is an acronym for the California Wine Association. Despite the connotations with California wine, like the West Side, it is impoverished, but it does not have the same scale of crime that can be found in the West Side, thus it is not known as a dangerous place. Founded in the early-twentieth

\textsuperscript{26} Clough, 36.
century, it developed and expanded until the 1980s on the east side of the UP mainline tracks south of downtown.

These are the most well-known communities and neighborhoods that compose the city of Fresno. It is a city of two sides, generalized by a wealthy north and east and a poor south and west. Sprawl is evident in the city’s history since the end of World War II beginning with Mayfair as it extended its borders northwards, while speculators and developers took advantage of the inexpensive land just beyond the ever expanding city limits. However, the San Joaquin River forms a border now that may be much more difficult to break through for city growth, as it is also the border between Fresno and Madera counties. The expansion of transportation infrastructure has historically directed growth in Fresno and may be the factor that will dictate the course such growth takes in the future.

**Transportation Infrastructure**

Fresno has a number of transportation systems that service it. In addition to its street network, the city has four highways/freeways, two main railroad lines, and three airports. Yet, Fresno is also the most populous city in the nation to be without an interstate highway.
The highways in Fresno are SR 99, SR 41, SR 180, and SR 168. SR 41 runs from Morro Bay on the southern-central coast via Atascadero to Fresno and on to Yosemite National Park in the north. SR 99 runs from south of Bakersfield to Fresno and on to Red Bluff via Sacramento. SR 168 starts in Fresno and makes its way east to Huntington Lake in the Sierras. SR 180 runs from Mendota in the west through Fresno.

Figure 19. Map of the main transportation infrastructure lines in Fresno.

28 Daniel P. Faigin, “State Route 99,”
SR 99 was the first of the highways to be constructed. The State constructed SR 99, amongst others, after the State Highways Act of 1909 became law. This legislation created a State Highway Fund in the State Treasury to segregate all moneys collected from highway bonds. These moneys were to “be used exclusively for the acquisition of rights of way for and the acquisition and construction of said system of state highways.”

While the routes were to be selected by the department of engineering and said route shall be so selected and said highways so laid out and constructed or acquired as to constitute a continuous and connected State highway system running north and south through the State traversing the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys and along the Pacific coast by the most direct and practicable routes, connecting the county seats of the several counties through which it passes and joining the centers of population, together with such branch roads as may be necessary to connect therewith the several county seats lying east and west of such State highway.30

In 1910, California voters approved the $18,000,000 bond measure to start construction of the proposed highways including SR 99, which at the time had the name Legislative Route Number (LRN) 4. After 1928, California highways received signs from the California State Automobile Association and the Automobile Club of Southern California, which posted state and federal route numbers commensurate with a highway’s position. This development designated LRN 4, US Route 99. The highway had become a federal road that ran from southern California to northern Washington and into Canada.

Originally, US 99 ran through downtown Fresno, however, in 1953, the federal government proposed a new route bypassing downtown. After the authorities adopted the idea, they began construction in 1954 and completed the section in 1957, integrating

it into the Freeway and Expressway System in 1959.\textsuperscript{31} The result was Fresno’s first freeway. Freeways are limited-access roads that do not have any at-grade intersections. This separates them from highways, which may not only have such intersections, but also may have full-access similar to city streets with driveways connected to them and sidewalks aside them. By 1960, the freeway had reached its current extent at Herndon Avenue before crossing the San Joaquin River in the northwest.\textsuperscript{32} In 1962, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) rerouted the southern portion of US 99 to a parallel strip of land to the west in order to expand the highway to six lanes with freeway standards.\textsuperscript{33} This diverted much traffic away from the old four-lane route, now known as Golden State Boulevard, which still runs through the center of numerous cities and towns in the central San Joaquin Valley. In 1963, the “great renumbering” legislation passed at the state level, which led to changes in most state highway signs beginning on July 1, 1964. The goal of the law was to simplify and clarify the numbering of the state highway system and to designate one highway number to each highway stretch whenever possible. As a result, the legislature altered the name of US Route 99 to its current name California SR 99.\textsuperscript{34} This change was also the result of the construction of Interstate 5, which led to federal decommissioning of US Route 99.

\textsuperscript{32} California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), Structure Maintenance and Investigations, California Log of Bridges on State Highways, District 6 (October 2009), http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/structur/strmaint/brlog2.htm (accessed January 4, 2010).
The state legislature defined SR 41, then LRN 125, in 1935. Unlike SR 99, which lies on mostly the western side of the city, SR 41 bisects the city of Fresno. Its original route entered the city at its southern end, went through downtown, and continued north of downtown passing over the San Joaquin River via Blackstone Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare. Its transformation into a freeway was a piecemeal process taking over two decades to reach the San Joaquin River. This process began in 1963 with a junction from US 99 to what would become SR 41, as it led into downtown. From 1966 to 1974, Caltrans built extensions that made SR 41 a viaduct around the east side of downtown Fresno to the neighborhood’s northeastern boundary at Divisadero Street. From 1979 to 1982, Caltrans furthered these extensions five miles to Bullard Avenue. In 1988 and 1989, construction continued yet again to reach Perrin Road. Finally, from 1999 to 2001, Caltrans completed the freeway across the San Joaquin River to its current terminus. This freeway would not be possible without the use of eminent domain powers. Even SR 99’s relatively small footprint required eminent domain in order to build through southwest Fresno. At the time, this had the effect of removing blighted neighborhoods from the area during the City’s effort to redevelop and rehabilitate downtown Fresno. The construction of Freeway 41 also spurred development in north Fresno as it decreased travel times to downtown and also created more efficient paths for large businesses to use as a means to supply their stores.

The state legislature defined SR 180 in 1905 as the Kings Canyon State Road, then known as LRN 41; however, it was not until 1933 that it connected to Fresno. The

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37 Clough, 66.
designation continued the highway further past Fresno, connecting the city with Tracy and Los Banos in the western section of the central San Joaquin Valley. The highway bisected south Fresno by way of Kings Canyon Road in the east and Whitesbridge Avenue in the west, connected to each other by a network of varying streets in downtown Fresno that changed over time due to the construction of different plazas such as the Fulton Mall. In 1980, Caltrans built the first portion of what would become the SR 180 freeway that branched away from the new portion of Freeway 41 built in the same year. However, this small stretch of freeway merely connected the new SR 41 directly to Blackstone Avenue. It was not until 1995 that Caltrans lengthened this freeway to connect SR 41 with SR 99 along the northern extents of downtown Fresno. In 1999, Caltrans continued the freeway to the east of SR 41, and in 2003, continued it to the west of SR 99. The latest extension in 2005 brought the freeway to beyond Fresno city limits to its terminus at Clovis Avenue, which takes drivers south to Kings Canyon Road on its route to Kings Canyon National Park. SR 180 connects each of the other freeways and is the only one that runs wholly east-west through Fresno.

The state legislature defined SR 168 in 1931; similar to SR 180 though, it did not go through Fresno until 1933, when the State added the Fresno to Huntington Lake route to LRN 76. The original form of the highway was Shaw Avenue, another road that zoning policies have since turned into a commercial thoroughfare. As the city sprawled further and further out, even with the construction of SR 41 and SR 180 freeways, the

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city of Clovis remained far away from downtown Fresno in terms of travel time. In order
to alleviate traffic conditions, Caltrans began construction on the SR 168 freeway
northward from SR 180 in 1999 running along the west side of Fresno Air Terminal and
the east side of Fresno State. Once in Clovis city limits, the freeway goes to the northeast
until reverting to its highway form as Tollhouse Road onto Huntington Lake.

The freeway system that has developed makes Fresno an easy place around which
to move. In 2007, a Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report detailed
congested transit times and percentages in the largest American cities. According to a
SustainLane study that used this data, Fresno ranked sixth best amongst the fifty most
populous urban areas for metro street congestion. The Urban Mobility Report stated
that Fresno averaged thirty-seven percent of travel that is congested during the peak
period and nineteen percent of travel that is congested over the course of a day. This
compares well with similarly sized cities such as Sacramento and Austin, which averaged
seventy-nine percent and sixty-eight percent respectively during the peak period and forty
and thirty-three percent respectively over the course of the day. Although the improved
traffic times make travel easier, it also is leading to a repetitive pattern observed after the
construction of Freeway 41 with increased sprawl as accessibility improves in the rural
areas. For example, Clovis, which had a population of 50,232 in 1990 grew to 68,468 by
2000, but by 2008 had added another nearly 24,000 residents with two years left until the

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rankings/cities/ fresno (accessed December 29, 2009).
42 David Schrank and Tim Lomax, “The 2007 Urban Mobility Report,” Texas Transportation Institute, The
decennial census at which rate it has likely added a total of about 30,000 residents over the decade, a sixteen percent increase over the 1990s growth.\textsuperscript{43}

In addition to the freeway system, Fresno also has multiple railroads that run through the city. The main lines of the UP and the BNSF run northwest-southeast through the San Joaquin Valley, connecting the county seats and agricultural hubs such as Hanford, Tulare, and Bakersfield in the south, as well as Madera and Merced in the north. The railroads likewise connect Fresno with San Francisco and the other large urban centers in the north, as well as Los Angeles in the south. The San Francisco connection was vital to the decision of BNSF, then the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, to purchase the San Francisco and San Joaquin Valley Railroad line, as it provided the company with their first link to the Bay Area.\textsuperscript{44}

Beyond these north-south connections, both railroads have spurs off these main lines. These go mostly east-west and connect the communities that are not on the main line including those at the edge of the Valley. In Fresno, the main lines run parallel with SR 99, while the spurs go through east and west Fresno. As a result of all these connections, Fresno’s geographical centrality in the state, and its proximity to raw produce, the city, with its two depots representing both railroads, became a hub for packing and shipping of agricultural products.

The Union Pacific Railroad (UP), formerly the Southern Pacific, which became the Central Pacific in 1884, was the first railroad to come to the region. Similar to many other cities in the West, the company was responsible for the founding, construction, and


initial progress of Fresno, starting with the rail laid through the San Joaquin Valley in 1872.

While BNSF did not have such an integral part in the history of Fresno, it has brought more economic development to the city. As stated earlier, the company bought the San Francisco and San Joaquin Valley Railroad line through the region in order to gain penetration to San Francisco. More importantly for Fresno though, the line brought competition to the Union Pacific, which had as “The Fresno Morning Republican of October 6, 1896, stated, ... ‘marked the beginning of an era of development and prosperity for the San Joaquin Valley in general and Fresno County in particular. The ‘octopus’ [as the Southern Pacific Railroad was known], whose tentacles have strangled commerce, industry and agriculture in this great basin, has been deprived of its power to do any further harm to these great interests.’”  

BNSF connected to the remaining cities that UP had bypassed, creating a more interconnected network in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Furthermore, Fresno has one commercial and two non-commercial airports. The first of these to be built was Chandler Field, now known as Fresno Chandler Executive Airport, which served as the commercial airport from 1929 to 1947 and is now a public airport for small non-commercial aircrafts. The airport is located about 1.5 miles west of the city core, which was ideal for businesses in downtown Fresno, but it did not allow for easy expansion when airport standards changed. Thus, in 1947, commercial service moved to the newer and larger Hammer Field, which the Army Air Corps had built in 1941 as a bomber base. The federal government deeded this site, about 5 miles northeast

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45 Ibid.
of downtown Fresno, to the City after it had stopped using the facilities in 1946. The military continued to operate on a portion of the airport, which the Air National Guard now maintains. During the transfer to civil service, Hammer Field was renamed Fresno Air Terminal with the regrettable airport code, FAT. The airport services mostly regional flights with some mainline flights to cities such as Denver and Dallas/Fort Worth. In 1995, the airport changed its name to Fresno-Yosemite International (FYI) with international destinations in Mexico in order to attract more tourists with the name recognition of the national park. Also, in the past decade, it has undertaken expansions to its terminals to bring more aircrafts to the city. FYI is the primary airport in the San Joaquin Valley, however, the distance to larger airports such as Los Angeles International (LAX), San Jose International (SJC), and San Francisco International (SFO), which are within four hours when driving, has created stiff competition for certain flights.

The third airport, Sierra Sky Park, was, as stated earlier, the first of its kind in the nation. It is the smallest of the three airports in Fresno, but is also the most unique. William Smilie pioneered and developed the project in 1946. Although the community is private, the strip is for public use. Similar to Chandler Field, its only traffic consists of small, private aircraft.

The street network is large and varied. The overarching street pattern, which originated in the county, is gridiron based on the United States Public Land Survey. The city has since assumed this pattern through annexation of county territory. However, surveyors of the early Fresno designed the town around the railroad tracks; the result was a downtown that has a tightly-knit gridiron pattern that runs northwest-southeast, while

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47 Clough, 63.
48 Clough, 279.
the remainder of Fresno runs on a loosely-knit gridiron pattern that runs north-south. The point where these two grids meet is called a break, where differing street patterns converge. Although this is the sharpest and most comprehensive break in the city, there are several others throughout Fresno. The gridiron pattern continued to dominate neighborhoods when development expanded beyond the original railroad town limits. However, by the 1950s, the patterns began to change as less monotonous patterns developed to give some variety to tract homes. The most common variations other than the standard gridiron pattern are the fragmented parallel and warped parallel patterns, with isolated numbers of loops and lollipops and lollipops-on-a-stick developments.49

Figure 20. Gridiron – Fragmented Parallel – Warped Parallel – Loops and Lollipops – Lollipops on a Stick.

These different patterns preserve the city’s history of growth and help distinguish neighborhoods from each other. In particular, the neighborhoods in and around Downtown, Lowell-Jefferson, the Tower District, Fresno City College, the Old Fig Garden, Huntington Boulevard, Pinedale, and the southern half of the West Side were set in a standard gridiron pattern. It is not a coincidence that each of these developments was planned and constructed prior to or during World War II.

Figure 21. Gridiron example in the Huntington Boulevard neighborhood.

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The neighborhoods that arose after the conclusion of the war have patterns that are more eclectic. The Van Ness Extension, Fresno State, Calwa, and the northern and western portions of the West Side exhibit fragmented parallel patterns; while Mayfair, the wealthy section of Sunnyside, Sierra Sky Park, the San Joaquin River Bluffs, Woodward Park, and Fort Washington exhibit warped parallel patterns. The City of Fresno has effectively constrained the development of dead-end roads such as cul-de-sacs and thus, loops and lollipops and lollipops-on-a-stick patterns appear only in limited areas within Sunnyside, Van Ness Extension, Woodward Park, and Fort Washington.

Transit Network

Streetcar and Horse-car network

The primary local infrastructure had not always been only roads. The rights of way of many current boulevards in the older districts of Fresno had once possessed tracks along their foundations. These tracks handled the earliest mass transit systems in the city.
with horse-car networks initially, followed by streetcars, before giving way to the buses that are commonplace today.

Fresno’s first mass transit system was a horse-car network. This started in 1887, just two years after the city’s incorporation, when the City gave a franchise to the Fresno Street Railroad, which opened its line in 1889. By 1901, this company was carrying 80,000 riders for 30,000 miles annually. Two rivals, the Fresno City, Belmont, and Yosemite Railroad and the Fresno Railroad Company, formed in 1889 as well. The prior

Figure 26. Map of Horsecar Lines that developed in late-19th century Fresno.
had the ambitious vision of connecting Fresno to the Sierra Nevada, a distance of nearly 100 miles. These initial horse-car lines had a total track mileage of just under only 3 miles. Increasing mobility, they gave Fresno the ability to expand outward from the original railroad town, particularly to the north, adjacent to Blackstone Avenue, and to the east, adjacent to Ventura Avenue to the County Fairgrounds. The horse-car line and the consequential growth helped initiate the first city annexations.\(^{50}\) In 1899, Fresno annexed lands in the north that increased the area of the city by over thirty-five percent, from 3.1 square miles to 4.2 square miles.\(^{51}\)

In 1901, the Fresno City Railway Company began construction of an electric system in Fresno and acquired track rights to the horse-car lines beginning with the Fresno City, Belmont, and Yosemite Railroad Company. They replaced these lines with much heavier rail that could support the larger electric streetcars. However, in 1905, another company, Fresno Traction Company, formed and leased all electric tracks in the city, about 10.25 miles, effectively taking over the Fresno City Railway Company.\(^{52}\) Fresno Traction had the clout and money to expand the extents and operations of rail in the city. Henry Huntington, nephew of Collis Huntington—one of the “Big Four” builders of the Central Pacific—headed the company. Fresno Traction built a subway under the Southern Pacific Railroad, which allowed for expansion of the lines to the west of the city. Soon the streetcar service made its way to the west side of downtown, connecting the area with the rest of the city. In 1910, the company double-tracked the


\(^{52}\) Clough, 248.
Figure 27. Map of Streetcar Lines that developed in early-20th century Fresno.

streetcar lines in order to increase the capacity of the system and to speed up travel times.

In the same year, the Southern Pacific Railroad assumed ownership of Fresno Traction as they continued to expand the system. By 1916, the system had 26.71 miles of tracks. Remarkably, by 1923, the company furthered the system to a total of over 50 miles. However, this was the peak of the streetcar system. At its largest extent, it serviced places as far out as the San Joaquin River by way of the bluffs and what would become

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53 Hamm, Jr., 18-20.
Van Ness Extension, as well as Pinedale and the Old Fig Garden in the north, Sunnyside in the east, and Roeding Park in the west.\textsuperscript{54}

Similar to the horse-car lines, the expansion of the streetcar lines correlated with the growth of the city. All annexations between 1910 and 1930 included lands with streetcar line services. This is a testament to the effects of improved mobility and increased infrastructure. Fresno Traction constructed their streetcar lines as well as paid for the paving costs of streets throughout the city in accordance with their original twenty years charter. In 1920, the city billed the company with $100,000 for paving mostly in outlying areas of the city. Fresno Traction fought this bill and when the company renewed the charter in 1922, they acquired more favorable terms, which made them responsible for pavement only in the track area. This event displayed the rising prominence of the automobile, a natural competitor to the streetcar.\textsuperscript{55}

Bus network

As Fresno Traction abandoned streetcar lines in the midst of the Great Depression, Fresnans clamored for buses. This overture made it to the newspapers in February 1936.\textsuperscript{56} In June 1937, Fresno Mayor Frank Homan “criticized the streetcar system as a problem to the city in three major areas: 1) The cars caused a traffic strain on the city streets; 2) Lines needed to be extended to reach a growing suburban area; 3) Overhead poles and track were unsightly.”\textsuperscript{57} By 1939, the people got their way as the streetcars had reached the end of their line, buses under Pacific City Lines, a subsidiary

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 72.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 27.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 72.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Clough, 252.
\end{itemize}
of National City Lines, Inc., superseded the antiquated mass transit system. Pacific City Lines also purchased the Harvey Avenue-Hazelwood Bus Line, which had filled in the gaps between the streetcar lines. This gave Pacific City Lines control of all mass transit operations in Fresno, which it converted into one bus system under the name Fresno City Lines.\textsuperscript{58}

Planned networks: BRT and Multi-Modal Trail

Today the same bus system continues to run throughout the city with only minor changes other than the expansion of routes and bus updates. The City of Fresno purchased Fresno City Lines’ municipal routes in 1961.\textsuperscript{59} Under city management, the system name changed in 1989 to Fresno Area Express (FAX). It services the majority of the city; however, routes are sparse in the northwestern portion of the city with only one line in the area that utilizes the Herndon Avenue thoroughfare.

The City of Fresno and FAX are currently in the process of studying bus rapid transit (BRT), which focuses on creating “an integrated system of facilities, equipment, services, and amenities that improve the speed, reliability, and identity of bus transit. BRT is, in many respects, rubber-tired light rail transit (LRT) with greater operating flexibility and potentially lower costs.”\textsuperscript{60} Once the project receives federal funding through the Very Small Starts program, the City will commence operation of a Ventura Avenue/ Kings Canyon Road corridor that will connect downtown to Sunnyside. This is one of four main corridors that the City has evaluated as possible placements for BRT;

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid.
altogether, these form a large square through the city. The other corridors go along Blackstone Avenue, Shaw Avenue, and Cedar Avenue. Of the four major corridors, Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road currently has the highest FAX ridership, which played a significant role in influencing the decision to test and implement this route before the others. The long-range plan is to provide a network of BRT along the largest thoroughfares in Fresno and Clovis, including Palm Avenue, Cedar Avenue, and Shields Avenue, in addition to the four primary routes. The normal buses, with altered schedules, would supplement the BRT system to provide the most coverage possible, while creating transfer points along the BRT lines to move people more efficiently throughout the city.\footnote{Ibid.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure28.png}
\caption{Map overlay of proposed BRT routes in Fresno as well as major activity centers such as public high schools and Fresno-Yosemite International Airport. Source: City of Fresno, Planning Department}
\end{figure}
Furthermore, in downtown, the City is exploring the option of creating a dedicated circulator around the central business district (CBD). A proposed mode for such a route is a streetcar, returning to the mass transit system of the early twentieth century. The City could potentially expand the system beyond the CBD loop to include areas such as Manchester Center, Fresno City College, the Tower District, Regional

Figure 29. Fresno bicycle route map with both existing and proposed routes. 
Source: City of Fresno, Planning Department
Medical Center, and the Federal Courthouse. Such connections would require rerouting BNSF trains to the UP Railroad corridor. Although the streetcar is a part of Fresno’s past, it would be an expensive venture to undertake at a cost of $20 million per mile.\textsuperscript{62}

The last alternative mode of intra-city transportation that the City has taken steps to study and put into motion is a multimodal bicycle, pedestrian, and equestrian network. Fresno has many bike lanes already, but the goal is to have them on every arterial street, so that each bicycle lane block stretches no more than one-half mile before intersecting another bicycle lane wherever possible throughout the city. This is a grand project that the City has scheduled to complete by 2025. In addition to the bicycle lanes, the City will construct a series of bicycle/pedestrian trails—some of which include equestrian access. These trails have their own paths aside from the streets, typically adjacent to canals. These different forms of transportation are likely to draw different segments of the population whose interests may align with one or multiple of these options. They have the added benefit of encouraging exercise; thus, they have an indirect benefit on the public health of the city. Lastly, they lead to zero-emissions transportation and therefore, they do not add further pollutants into the atmosphere in a place that consistently has one of the worst air quality indices in the United States.

Interurban Systems: Greyhound, Amtrak, and High Speed Rail

Fresno currently has two ground-based intercity mass transit options: Greyhound Lines, Inc. and Amtrak. Both corporations are nationally recognized and have relatively

\textsuperscript{62}Wilbur Smith Associates, “City of Fresno: Downtown Transportation & Infrastructure Study” (study, City of Fresno, Fresno, CA, October 2007), 4-13, 4-14.
poor reputations. The lack of access to affordable alternatives to leave the city
demonstrates the reliance upon personal vehicles in the region.

However, after California voters approved Proposition 1A in November 2008, the
emergence of a high-speed rail (HSR) network became probable in the state’s future.
The proposition will match up to $9 billion of funding for the construction of HSR from
San Francisco to Los Angeles. This, in addition to a $2.25 billion award, accounts for
about one quarter of the needed funding projected to build the entire route. According to
the California High-Speed Rail Authority, the project will cost $42.6 billion. The HSR
network will include a station in Fresno. This would place Fresno under 1.5 hours in
travel time to San Francisco and Los Angeles and in an hour to Sacramento and San Jose,
giving it an ideal location to connect commuters and businesses to four of the five most
populous areas in the state. HSR has the ability to transform the city from its commencement of service in 2017. If
transit-oriented development (TOD) should take hold alongside HSR stations, one might
expect to see a dramatic rise in the infill development of downtown Fresno as the
desirability to live near the station pushes land values in the neighborhood up. This
increase in value should lead to the erection of high density structures to more cost-
effectively manage the limited real estate within a comfortable distance of the station.
The network may also be likely to spur city and regional development as localities look
to connect themselves to HSR. The optimistic speculation may not bear fruit if HSR

63 California High-Speed Rail Authority, “Fact Sheet: December 2009 Business Plan Report to the
(accessed January 30, 2010).
64 California High-Speed Rail Authority, “Interactive Rail Map,”
travel proves to be unreliable or too expensive. Much will depend on the state’s ability to manage such a large operation with the expediency of a private organization.

Figure 30. Map of proposed California HSR alignment.
Any increase in the usage of mass and multimodal transit systems should positively impact the community as they indirectly slow down sprawl. Sprawl is a costly growth policy not only to the local government, but also to the environment. The increased infrastructure demands, including police and firefighter protection, expansion of the education system, road maintenance, and utility extensions all cost money that may start low initially, especially if deals are struck with real estate developers, but increase over time as the area gets older and becomes more prone to problems. However, if a city and county are not synchronized well, they can hurt each other with their exclusive legal procedures. The city of Fresno and Fresno County are well-acquainted with these troubles as they have sought to organize an annexation process that reduces the burden of both governments by increasing the efficiency of their services.

**Annexation, Incorporation, and Land Use**

City annexation is the process by which an existing city expands its jurisdiction. Annexation offers county residents unique neighborhood services and programs that a county government is unable to provide. It gives them the opportunity to participate in citywide elections, which in turn gives them more political capital in city-related decisions. Although people can still take part in city council meetings as residents of unincorporated areas, their views may not carry the same weight as they would as citizens, who take part in local elections and pay taxes to the city.

Furthermore, annexations release counties of undue burdens to pay for costly services in urban areas. Policymakers did not build county tax structures to take on those responsibilities. Counties provide necessary services across a large area proportionally.
This dilutes the level of service in urban areas relative to their city-sponsored counterparts. On the other hand, a city assesses bonds and fees that pay for specific programs that are focused on improving the quality of life of the city alone. The concentration of their budget on a smaller and denser area allows for more efficient and higher quality services. Despite these extra levies in a city, county residents most often pay only negligibly less money for their lower level of services, which are diluted across a greater area.65

Fresno has undertaken a piecemeal and complex, if not illogical, annexation process since the incorporation of the city in 1885. Fresno’s original city limits included an area of 1,900 acres or about 2.96 square miles. By 2010, annexations and incorporations have added 1,388 different parcels over the years, augmenting the size of the city to 72,000 acres or about 112 square miles. This 3,200 percent increase in area over 125 years is impressive by any standards.66 However, Fresno occasionally failed to annex tracts of land due to the protests of residents, particularly in unincorporated communities such as the Old Fig Garden, Cincotta (Mayfair), Sunnyside, and Sierra Sky Park. The city annexed around these places forming “county islands” where the county continues to work as the primary provider of services. Fresno currently has nearly 6,700 acres or 10.47 square miles of unincorporated urban areas within its boundaries.67 This land use practice has put stress on the county as it spends disproportionate amounts of money to upkeep these isolated places. It also has caused much confusion amongst

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66 City of Fresno, Information Services Department, “Annexation History.”
67 Ibid.
residents and officials as to jurisdictional responsibilities to these pockets.68

Figure 31. Map of annexation history of Fresno displaying physical growth as the city expanded its borders.

These county islands are reminders of the past and are reference points that show the relative growth of the city of Fresno on any local map. For example, when Pinedale, which resides 6 miles north of downtown Fresno, received a post office in 1923, the city limits of Fresno were 3 miles south of the community. By the mid-1970s, the city had annexed all of the area surrounding it.69 Similarly, when Sunnyside, formerly known as

68 Fresno LAFCo, “Island Annexations.”
69 City of Fresno, Information Services Department, “Annexation History.”
Maltermoro, received a post office in 1894, five years before the first annexation, the city limits of Fresno were 3 miles west of the community. By the early-1980s, the city had annexed all of the area surrounding it. These two examples show that growth was not evenly distributed. To the southeast, south, southwest, and west of the city core, most city growth still has not reached further than 2.5 miles, whereas to the east, most city growth has extended just over 6 miles. However, Fresno has grown significantly more in the northwest, north, and northeast with nearly all space up to the San Joaquin River subdivided, populated, and annexed, this area covers ranges from 8 to 12 miles distance from the city core. The growth northward is indicative of Fresno’s land use policies as it consistently made the regions south and west of the city less desirable places than those regions north and east of the city.

South and West Fresno

The disincentives against the southern and western sections of the city developed began from the outset of incorporation. In the 1880s, the west side consisted of a local “Chinatown,” quartering off not only Asians, but also other immigrants and people of ill repute. Authorities became negotiable there and corruption was rampant. It was the city’s foremost entertainment district, where lumberjacks, miners, and farm workers could spend their paychecks. This made the west side an invaluable part of the early Fresno economy, while it simultaneously marked the section with a lasting stigma.

In addition to the West Side developing a reputation as a center of vice, in 1891, the City of Fresno constructed an outfall sewer to a 40-acre ‘sewer farm’ about seven miles distance from the city core.

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miles west-southwest of town; the City soon increased this to 80 acres in order to
increase capacity. By 1909, the City further expanded the capacity of the farms to 892
acres. This place remains the site of the City’s wastewater management. From 1933 to
1960, Fresno used sewage to irrigate nearby fields for cattle feed.\textsuperscript{71} It was not until 1947
that industrial sewage received primary treatment at a facility east-southeast of Fresno
prior to disposal.\textsuperscript{72} The result of this operation was an unhealthy and odious neighboring
environment effectively thwarting any growth near the farms.

Moreover, in 1937, the City purchased 20 acres for the nation’s first modern
sanitary landfill just 3 miles southwest of downtown and about 1.5 miles from the extent
of existing city development. Although this site was much more than a dump, which
ordinarily produces rodent and debris problems, it still was the place where the City took
its refuse, emanating its own pungent scent. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill remained in
operation until 1987 making it also the nation’s oldest landfill operation.\textsuperscript{73} Like the
sewer farms to the west, it deterred city development in its direction.

Lastly, mid-twentieth century zoning measures created an industrial corridor
along US Route 99 as well as an industrial block around then Hammer Field.\textsuperscript{74} Industrial
parks have worked as barriers in Fresno. When they arise, development on their backside
falters. The section south of the city core consists of the heavy industry, which blocked
off the remaining alternatives for city growth in that direction with non-industrial land

\textsuperscript{71} City of Fresno, Department of Public Utilities, “Wastewater Plant History,” City of Fresno,
\textsuperscript{72} Clough, 62.
uses. Along the highway corridor, at the now incorporated communities of Highway City and Biola Junction seven miles northwest of downtown Fresno and going as far northwest as the incorporated community of Herndon nearly ten miles from downtown Fresno, a stretch of light industry lines SR 99 and the parallel UP tracks. Another corridor exists along east-west UP tracks that merge with the main north-south line in downtown Fresno. This industrial park is within two miles of the city core; it has formed a barrier dividing the open space land use to the south and the mostly residential zones to
the north. Light industry also surrounds Fresno Air Terminal. Although city growth has brought residences up to the northwestern corner of the airport, little exists to the east of it. These borders have reduced the desirability of their respective areas, creating vacuums that attract ever less traffic and decrease land values.

Figure 33. Map of relative wealth in Fresno by 1999 median family income.

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North and East Fresno

The scene contrasts sharply to the north and east of downtown Fresno. Rural sprawl had taken hold as the city struggled to keep pace with development through annexations. On May 27, 1945, an article in the Fresno Bee reported that “Fresno was surrounded by and carried the burden for numerous thickly settled suburbs that totaled at least 35,000 people.” North of the city core, the City zoned commercial belts on east-west Belmont and Olive Avenues in the 1930s and 1940s. Developers catered this area to both pedestrians and automobiles with a few parking lots, on-street parking, and narrow roads. However, in the mid-1950s, the City gave license to build a new shopping complex called Manchester Center about three miles north of the city core on the north-south Blackstone Avenue. This place was the first direct competitor with Fresno’s central business district. Sears Roebuck and Company closed down its operations downtown to move to Manchester Center, while other large stores opened outlets. It was the first truly automobile-oriented shopping center in the city with massive parking lots that greatly increased accessibility to people living further away from downtown, particularly in the north. It also cemented the City’s commitment to making Blackstone Avenue a commercial thoroughfare.

As suburbanization and, consequently, annexations pushed further north, the city established two more east-west commercial belts at Shaw and Herndon Avenues. Fashion Fair, a regional shopping center that was developed in 1970, represented the City’s first serious break with its general plan and college community plan adopted in 1958 and 1961 respectively, and updated in 1964 and 1965. The controversial move

76 Clough, 61.
77 City of Fresno, Information Services Department, “Existing Land Use.”
78 Clough, 66.
changed the character of Shaw Avenue from a residential district into another commercial thoroughfare rivaling Blackstone Avenue. Although many of the affected citizens disapproved of the project, Fashion Fair successfully became and presently remains the dominant mall in Fresno.\textsuperscript{79} This set precedent for the development of Herndon Avenue in the 1990s as the City zoned it into another commercial thoroughfare two miles north of Shaw Avenue. All of these shopping districts increased the desirability of land to the north of the city. They also helped to send downtown Fresno and its shopping center, the large-scale pedestrian-oriented Fulton Mall, which the City had completed in 1964, into decay. Rather than creating barriers to development as the industrial parks had done, the commercial strips created seams that promoted more growth beyond them. However, northward city growth all but ceased as it reached the banks of the San Joaquin River; in order to satiate demand, development has gone to the northeast into and beyond the city of Clovis, turning it into essentially a suburb of Fresno.

\textsuperscript{79}Ibid., 72.
To the east, much city growth took place initially during the 1920s through the 1940s, when developers constructed homes on the routes to the communities of Sunnyside and Goldleaf. The Fresno fairgrounds split these two routes of development. Two streetcar routes by way of the Sunnyside and Recreation Lines had serviced the area, going between downtown Fresno, the fairgrounds, and the outside community. By 1960,
development had reached these two communities, extending Fresno’s city limits along with it. However, the subdivisions on the east side of the fairgrounds remained a part of the county while the subdivisions to the north and to the south incorporated themselves into Fresno.\(^{80}\) Situations such as this led to a city-wide campaign under Fresno Mayor Ted Wills to extend city boundaries to the “1975 Urban Unification line,” which the City and County had collaborated on designating. This campaign continued under the leadership of Joseph Levy, the president of Gottschalk’s, a regional independent chain of department stores. His theme was “Square Off in ’74; You Win When You’re In,” implying lower taxes and more efficient government and services.\(^{81}\) In the end, much of these county islands were annexed during this period, including those subdivisions next to the fairgrounds. Despite the city’s efforts, it was unable to annex either of the two still unincorporated communities of Sunnyside and Goldleaf, which consequently became county islands by the mid-1980s when city development had surpassed them.

Nonetheless, the city is making a concentrated effort to develop the section creating a special planning district called the Southeast Growth Area. This district “covers over 14 square miles and will eventually house 55,000 residents. This area was designated as the City’s major new growth community in the 2025 Fresno General Plan, acknowledged by the County of Fresno in November 2002, and added to the City’s Sphere of Influence in May 2006.”\(^{82}\)

Land use plans heavily favored the expansion of the city northwards until geographic and political obstacles became great enough to halt it at the San Joaquin

\(^{80}\) City of Fresno, Information Services Department, “Annexation History.”

\(^{81}\) Clough, 79.

River. As the northern extents have mostly thrived as a result of this course, the southern extents have similarly wilted. Fresno has continually tried to keep up with development through the annexation process, which has resulted in a fragmented city with many county islands. Meanwhile, the implementation of general plans and the subsequent zonings have created and reinforced a single land use structure with commercial districts concentrated heavily around several thoroughfares, industrial parks built in close proximity to each other, and government buildings throughout downtown, while residential subdivisions fill the large void spaces between these zones. The result is an expansive city with little land use diversity.

**Conclusion**

Fresno began as a Southern Pacific Railroad station in the dry and sparsely populated San Joaquin Valley. It quickly became the principal city in the region outpacing the growth of many other communities, eventually reaching its current population 125 years later with nearly 500,000 residents. In this process, like any other city, it went through periods of growth, decline, and stagnation. Nevertheless, Fresno separated itself from other cities in the region with its location at the heart of the Valley and its infrastructure that utilized this beneficial location. From horse-cars to streetcars to buses to automobiles, the city developed proportionally to the limits of concurrent mobility. When the city was still young, citizens settled in areas most convenient for access to services, just as people do today. The result was a relatively dense initial urban growth. This area transformed into a downtown as people settled further and further away from the city center, finding lots near the various horse-car and, later, streetcar
lines. The advent of the automobile era came to Fresno sowed the first seeds of sprawl as people began to move further away. Finally, at the end of World War II, the GI Bill allowed returning veterans to apply for low interest home loans that made it possible for millions of families to move into new suburban homes. This changed the housing climate in America and still sixty years later, the ‘American Dream’ culminates in the purchase of a home. The impact of this trend on Fresno has been profound as the city developed northward with tract homes and subdivisions until it reached the San Joaquin River, approximately eight miles from the central business district. Freeway systems built into the city further enabled this march northward. And now, the city with its bands of commercial corridors amidst the sea of houses is facing a new trend that refocuses development on the interior rather than on open space with its goal of becoming a more livable community—one where a person can enjoy living, whether by driving, walking, riding, or even flying. Fresno is a product of its past and, as such, must look back on it as a reference for looking into future.
## Appendix

Table 2. Key for existing land use map legend (see pp. 47 and 51), Source: City of Fresno, Planning Department.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
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<td>cc</td>
<td>community commercial</td>
<td>pcce</td>
<td>convention center</td>
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<td>ccr</td>
<td>commercial-recreational</td>
<td>pces</td>
<td>California state university</td>
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<td>community commercial/part vacant</td>
<td>pf</td>
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<td>general heavy commercial</td>
<td>pfg</td>
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<td>county courthouse</td>
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<td>office commercial/ part vacant</td>
<td>ppo</td>
<td>post office</td>
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<td>parking</td>
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<td>parking-vacant</td>
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<td>freeway 168</td>
<td>pqge</td>
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<td>rural density residential</td>
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<tr>
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<td>community activity center</td>
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