

MERCED COUNTY UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PLAN
POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER

Rural Residential Centers (RRC)

For CPAC Discussion: April 12, 2001 Meeting

1. Issue:

Determination of appropriate land use within the designated RRC low-density residential uses area. The RRC is located between the higher density residential and commercial uses in the City of Merced and the University Community Plan (UCP) Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP).

Background

Merced County, through its General Plan policies, instituted land uses to help protect its important agricultural lands. One of these land uses is named "Rural Residential Center" (RRC) and serves as a low-density buffer between urban land and agricultural land uses.

Merced County is one of the most important agricultural counties in the State of California, annually producing over \$1 billion worth of agricultural products. Agricultural uses, including grazing, row crops, and orchards, surround most cities and communities in Merced County. In order to reduce conflicts where agricultural and urban uses meet, RRC's have been put in place to create a transition zone. Such a transition zone exists immediately to the east of the City of Merced's urban area (see Figure 1).

The proposed relocation of the University Community south of the Merced Hills Golf Course and east of Lake Road will establish a new SUDP east of the RRC. At issue is whether or not the current RRC designation should be retained, replaced by a higher density comparable to adjoining City of Merced and UCP designations, or supplemented by new design standards intended to achieve "estate" quality development.

RRC zones consist of large lots (one acre or greater) and permit accessory agricultural uses such as live stock pasturing, horse stables, and hobby farming. RRC's, traditionally, lack full urban services and often rely on septic systems and well water. Even though parcels within an RRC have rural attributes, they are considered by the County to be urban land uses.

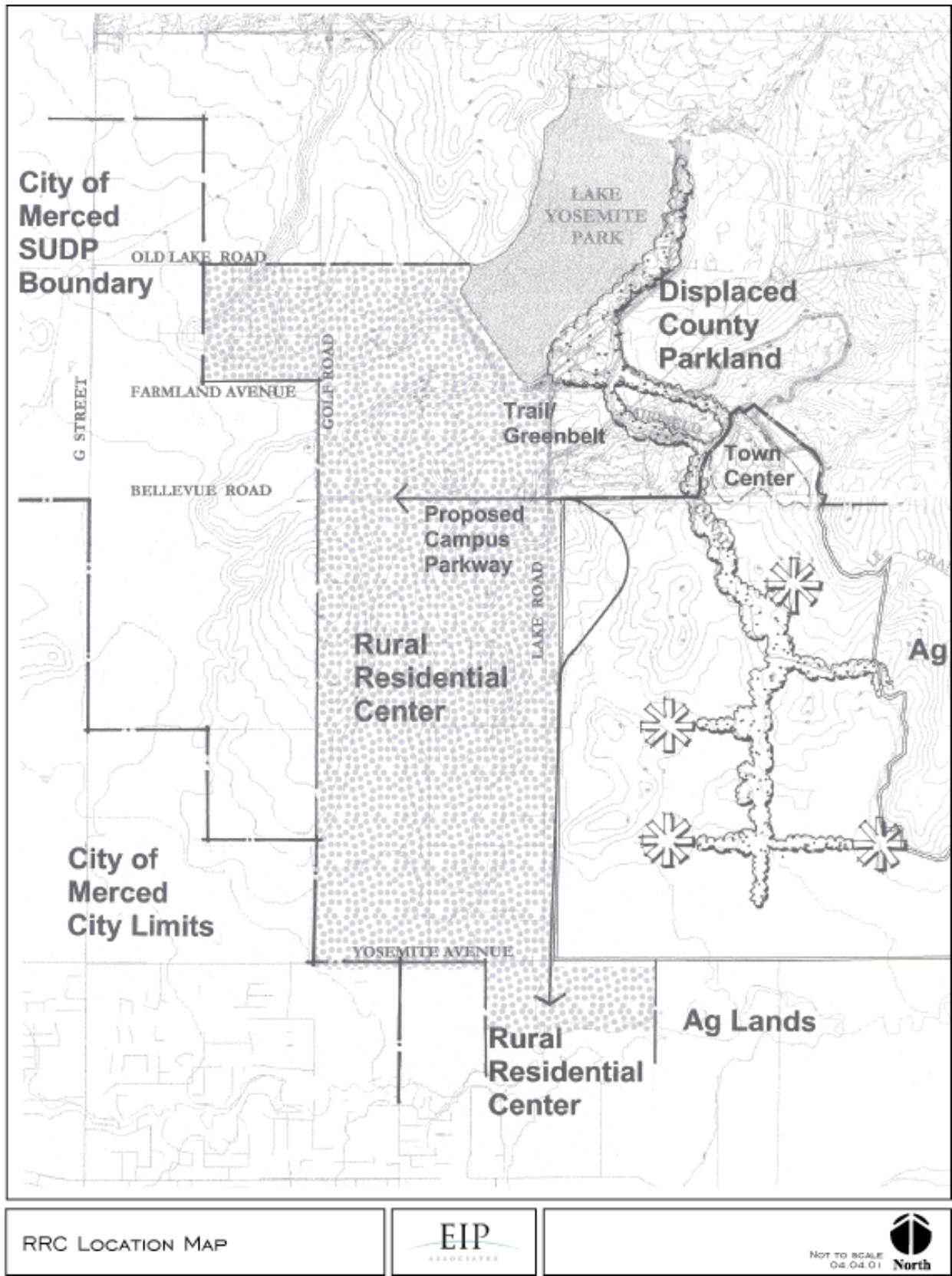


Figure. 1

Within other RRC zones, the County zoning allows up to three (3) dwelling units per acre (du/ac) on parcels when community water and sewer are provided. For this RRC, the City and County have agreed that, under current conditions, the density shall remain at one (1) du/ac. Typically, but not in this case, three development options within an RRC are allowable:

- 1 acre density – sewer or septic
- 3 du/ac (net) – community water and sewer
- 3 du/ac (gross) in cluster with large open space

Recreational and institutional facilities are allowed within RRC's with a Conditional Use Permit.

1.1 Issues Associated with Rural Residential Centers (RRC)

Issues Identified by the Merced County General Plan

Within the County's General Plan is a discussion of the County's concerns associated with RRC's in general and does not specifically address the RRC adjacent to the UCP SUDP. As stated on page I-9 of the County's General Plan, the county lists a number of concerns about RRC's. The first of the County's concerns is that large lot subdivisions are "inefficient land use in terms of agricultural land conversion to urban uses and in terms of service delivery costs to the County".

The second concern is the potential for the individual septic systems to contaminate the ground water.

The third concern is potable water standards for individual wells. Due to strict drinking water requirements, ground water quality may not permit the use of well water. If community water service is not provided, some lots may not have readily accessible drinking water.

Other Identified Concerns

Urban infrastructure services will be developed immediately west and east of the RRC, thereby likely creating a demand for the infrastructure to be extended to the RRC.

Policy Options

- A. Policy Option 1: Retain the RRC between the City and the SUDP.

This option maintains the current zoning permitting minimum one-acre lots. This policy maintains a transitional area of low-density land uses surrounded by higher density urban land uses within the City of Merced and the SUDP.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Current zoning and land uses remain as they are, maintaining commitments to current property owners.
- Provides an opportunity for a less-urban life style in close proximity to the University.
- Differentiates uses between the City and the SUDP, avoiding homogenous patterns of land use.

Disadvantages:

- Allows agricultural functions that may be incompatible with surrounding land uses.
- Septic systems in the RRC may contaminate ground water, assuming no urban services.
- Well water systems in the RRC may or may not be acceptable, assuming no urban services.

- B. Policy Option 2: Maintain the RRC as a low-density island and develop new design guidelines and standards.

This option keeps the density and land uses at low levels and develops design standards and guidelines to eliminate uses and functions not be compatible with adjoining urban uses and enhance the estate quality of development. Guidelines would guide future development in a harmonious and pleasing manner, particularly along such important streets such as Cardella Road, Yosemite Avenue, Bellevue Road, and Lake Road. The goal would be to transform the neighborhood into a high quality, rural estate neighborhood. Design standards

for locating buildings may also reduce potential impacts on and preserve important wetlands and vernal pools in this area.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Higher visual quality and “prestige” associated with well-designed communities.
- Provides opportunity for an exclusive, well-designed, low-density neighborhood as a transition between the City and the SUDP.
- Little demand to increase densities because value will rise as a result of quality rather than density.
- The purpose of the area shifts from being an agricultural buffer to a “quality” residential community.
- Opportunity to reduce wetland and vernal pool impact.

Disadvantages:

- Septic systems in the RRC may contaminate ground water, assuming no urban services.
- Well water systems in the RRC may or may not be acceptable, assuming no urban services.

- C. Policy Option 3: Change the City/County Revenue Sharing Agreement to permit up to three dwelling units per acre (assuming urban services).

This option allows for a modest density increase to reflect the higher surrounding densities and yet allow for a continuation of the low-density character that currently exists. The key to this option is a mutually agreed-upon revision to the current City/County Revenue-Sharing Agreement. The provision of urban infrastructure is relatively easy, considering the location of existing utilities in the City and future utilities in the SUDP.

Advantages and Disadvantages:

Advantages:

- A modest increase in density with little impact on surrounding land uses and infrastructure.
- Retains current character and feel.
- Provides County-wide consistency among the RRC's.

Disadvantages:

- Requires modification of the existing City/County Revenue Sharing Agreement.

D. Policy Option 4: Change zoning to permit higher urban densities comparable with those in the City of Merced and SUDP.

This option would increase permissible densities to match those found to the west in the City of Merced and to the east in the UCP. This would require the provision of urban infrastructure services and the subdivision of existing lots. The fundamental character of the community would change from exclusively large lots to a mixture of large and small lots.

Advantages and Disadvantages:

Advantages:

- Requires the provision of urban infrastructure, eliminating the issues of ground water contamination and reliance on well water.
- Allows connectivity of City and SUDP infrastructure
- Eliminates (in the long-run) conflicts between low and higher-density development.

Disadvantages:

- Conflicts caused by ancillary agricultural uses during the transition of from low density to higher density.
- Loss of distinct community.
- Potentially significant impacts on wetlands and vernal pool resources.

E. Policy Option 5: Locate urban land uses along the Bellevue Corridor

This option recognizes the City of Merced's planning for a public transportation corridor along Bellevue Road,

extending between "M" Street and the UC Campus and Community. The City's General Plan reflects a number of commercial centers along that corridor, particularly in the Bellevue Ranch planning area.

Significant areas of wetlands occur in this area, particularly within the RRC.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Recognizes the Bellevue Corridor as an important transportation corridor and, as such, also as an important commercial corridor.
- Opportunity to create urban villages in the northern portion of the RRC, within walking distance to public transportation and commercial and mixed-use centers.

Disadvantages:

- Requires new zoning within portions of the existing RRC.
- Urbanization will impact wetlands.

- F. Policy Option 6: Create new RRC's or buffers at the eastern and southern edges of the SUDP.

This option relocates the RRC buffer between urban land uses and agricultural uses to the southern and/or eastern edges of the SUDP.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Would allow ancillary agricultural uses to abut existing agricultural uses.

Disadvantages:

- Loss of agricultural lands in the new RRC area

- G. Policy Option 7: Promote the development of public golf course within the RRC as an integral component of a large lot (one acre) community.

This option responds to the loss of the existing Merced Hills Golf Course and reconstructs it elsewhere in the vicinity. High-end housing would front the fairways and perimeter of the course.

The creation of the new golf course could contribute to the creation of a "recreation corridor" in north Merced. The "recreation corridor" consists of the existing Country Club, Lake Yosemite, the County Park, and this proposed golf course.

Development would have to be designed to account for the wetlands and vernal pools.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Creates an amenity for the development of a high quality, large lot neighborhood.
- Maintains public golf in northern Merced.
- Creative design mitigates impacts of wetlands and actually causes the systematic preservation of wetlands within the golf course area.

Disadvantages:

- Requires the assembly of approximately 200 acres of privately owned land
- May require public assistance for financial feasibility
- Requires wetland permitting

1.2 Policy Recommendations

Participants in the March 24, 2001 UCP/UCM Planning Fair held in the City of Merced had the following opinions regarding these options: 45% of the respondents favored re-designating the RRC as urban lands; 41% favored re-designating the Bellevue Road Corridor for urban uses; and 14% favored retaining the RRC as it is.

1.3 Conclusions

It is our opinion that a combination of Policy Options 2 and 7 afford the best opportunity to:

- Maintain a distinct, low-density, high quality neighborhood as a transition between the City of Merced and the University Community.
- Replace the Merced Hills Golf Course and create a new amenity that will be an anchor for a unified recreational corridor that connects the City and SUDP.
- Reduce impacts on wetlands and vernal pools.
- Preserve the area's low-density character.