

# MERCED COUNTY UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PLAN POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER

## Environmental Resources Management/ Topography and Views

*For CPAC Discussion: May 10, 2001 Meeting*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This report presents a series of objectives and policy options for inclusion in the *Environmental Resources Management* section of the *Merced County University Community Plan*. The document is presented for discussion purposes only and will be updated and refined based on continuing analysis and CPAC input.

### TOPOGRAPHY

#### **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

The University Community planning area is characterized by gently sloping lands from the northeast to the southwest that exhibit little topographic form, particularly in comparison to the rolling grasslands to the immediate northeast. The maximum elevation change across the property is approximately 60 feet. As a consequence, the natural topography offers little inherent opportunity to help shape development patterns or create an urban form that is distinguished from the prevailing lowland development of Merced.

It is at the site's edges that the greatest change and diversity of topography exists. The Le Grand Canal, along the eastern portion of the proposed Community site, acts as a distinct barrier differentiating the flatlands from the more variable and rolling topography to the east. The northern portion of the University Community site is separated from the proposed campus site by a major drainage corridor, Cottonwood Creek.

Within this context, it should be noted that there is some variability of terrain within the Community site. Cottonwood Creek and several other natural drainages define and circumscribe a number of gently sloping mesas or mounds. These are particularly evident immediately east of Lake Road (location of the Hunt House) and on portions of the Myers' property west of the Fairfield Canal. These are subtle changes in topography that are not readily apparent when viewed at any distance. But, on site, they provide physical relief and character.

## **POLICY OPTIONS—AN OVERVIEW**

From a common development perspective, the gentleness and lack of significant topographic formations would likely be disregarded in the grading of the site for development. The typical practice would be for extensive grading, creating large flat pads to accommodate housing, commercial buildings, and other uses. On the original upland University Community SUDP, the character and diversity of topography would have suggested a far different solution. Topographic forms could have been used as a persuasive influence of the pattern and scale of development, roadways, and open spaces.

While far subtler, the new site's forms offer some opportunities to create interest and character that, in the opinion of the consultant team, should not be ignored. Grading practices should be considered that reflect the site's natural drainages, topography, contours, and elevations in lieu of commonly used flat land approaches. The latter is easier and, likely, somewhat less costly, but misses the opportunity to create urban forms that exhibit a subtlety of place and character.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### Objective

Develop an urban form that recognizes the site's subtle topography, creating a distinct sense of place, quality, and character.

### Policy Options

1. Require that the development of the University Community site reflect the character of its underlying topography, retaining basic forms, contours, and elevations.
2. In areas characterized by topographic diversity, require that development be located and designed to mimic the natural topography and that the use of extensive flat pads and cut-and-fill slopes be prohibited.
3. Retain natural drainages for storm drainage, detention, recreation, and open space, except where modifications may be necessary to accommodate cohesive transportation and utility infrastructure.

## **VIEWS**

## **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

As indicated above, the University Community planning area is characterized by gently sloping lands from the northeast to the southwest with little elevation change. They transition from the rolling grasslands in the northeast to the flat agricultural lands to the west and south. As such, viewsheds from the site are short-distanced and, primarily, of surrounding properties. Unlike the original Community SUDP, there is insufficient elevation to provide views of the City or Lake Yosemite. However, the new Community

site continues to provide some opportunity for views to the Sierra Nevada to the northeast, due to their height and visual dominance.

The elevation change between the golf course, in particular the location of the proposed initial phase campus buildings, and the Community offer opportunities to establish viewing corridors from the Community (in the vicinity of the proposed Town Center and north-south open space corridor) to the proposed campus core.

## **POLICY OPTIONS—AN OVERVIEW**

While viewshed opportunities are substantially diminished from the upland SUDP, the backdrop of the Sierra and elevation of the proposed campus core are visual assets that can be capitalized upon through careful building and roadway siting. In the opinion of the consultant, a policy to ignore these possibilities would be a missed opportunity to distinguish the University Community.

The site's flatness precludes the development of viewsheds from every lot to the Sierra or campus. However, transportation corridors and public open spaces (parks, plazas, and other) can be oriented to provide public views to these areas.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### *Objective*

Develop a pattern of urban development, transportation corridors, and open spaces that provides high quality viewshed opportunities.

### *Policy Options*

1. Locate and design principal transportation corridors to provide public views of the Sierra Nevada and, where appropriate, the UCM campus core.
2. Incorporate plazas and squares at the confluence and termination of streets and pedestrian paths, in the principal Community activity centers (Town Center and Residential Village Neighborhood Centers), and other public places and design them to provide viewsheds of the Sierra Nevada, surrounding grasslands, and, where appropriate, the UCM campus core.
3. Locate and design sites and buildings to serve as visual landmarks within the University Community (e.g., siting of buildings and parks as visual termini of streets, neighborhood areas, etc.; use of towers and other architectural elements; and so on).
4. Design principal entry corridors to the University Community as landscaped amenities that provide viewsheds of the Town Center, UCM campus core, Sierra Nevada, and other visual assets.