Community Engagement and Smart Growth Planning in Fresno, CA
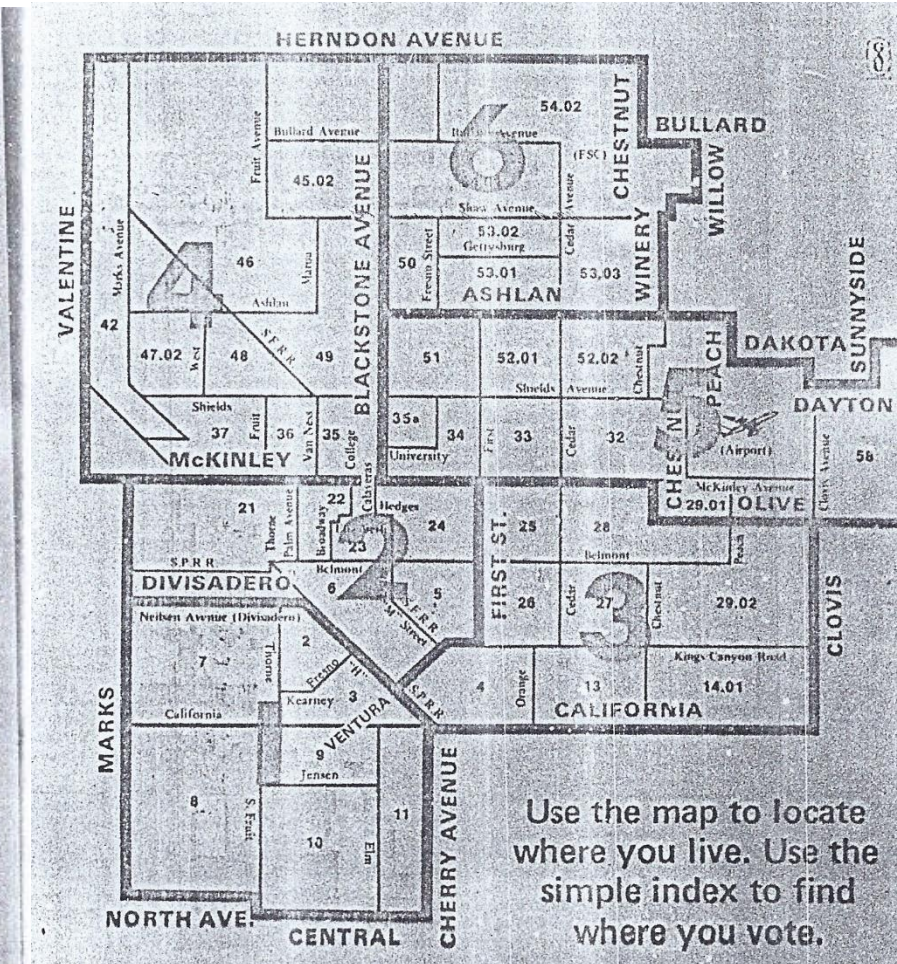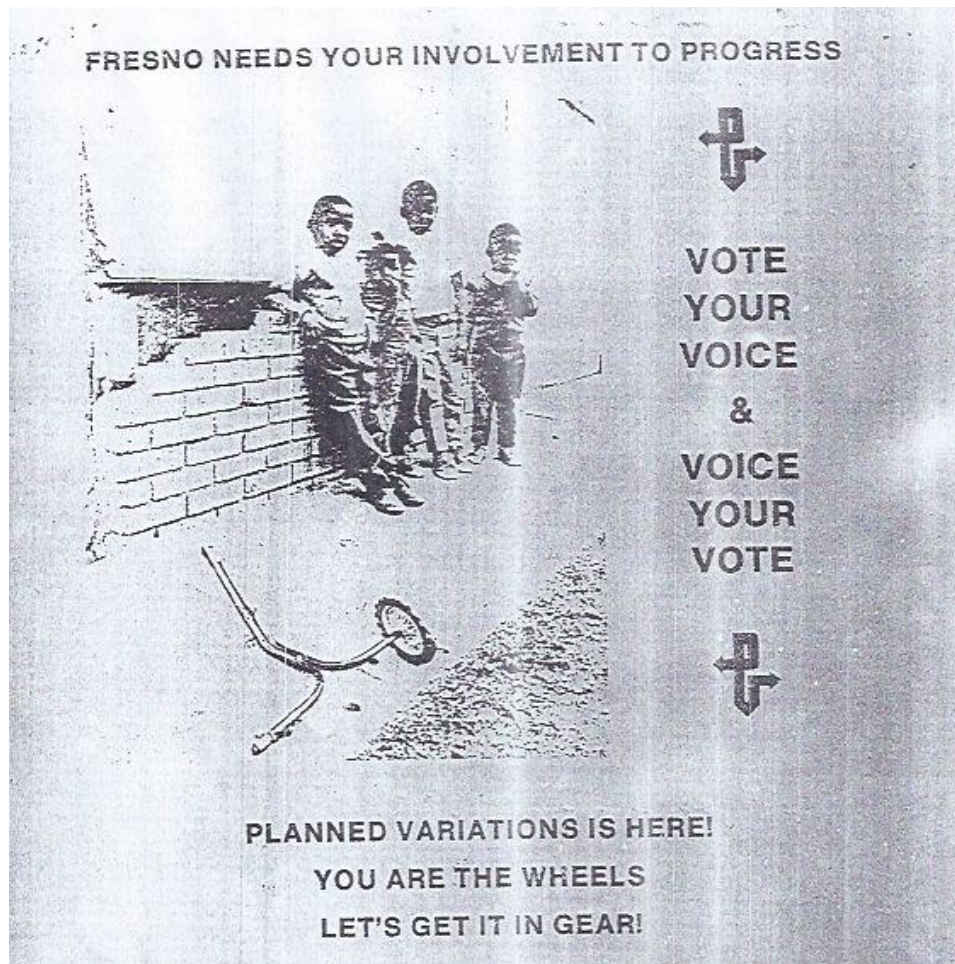
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New Partners for Smart Growth

2/13/2014

Outline

1. Historical Context

2. Lessons Learned from studying community engagement in Fresno
   - Downtown Neighborhoods Community Plan
   - General Plan Update

3. Questions to consider when designing and evaluating your community engagement approach
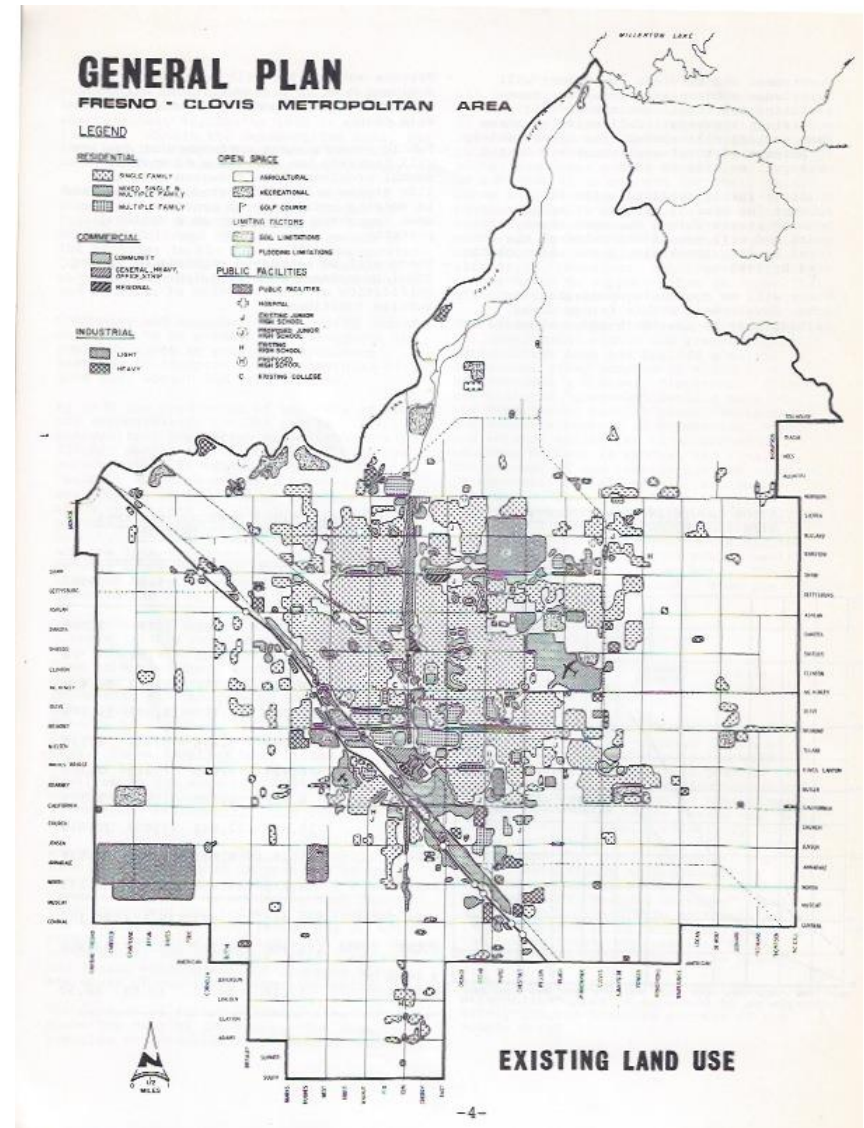   - City
   - CBOs

This is not the first case of community engagement in land use planning in Fresno!
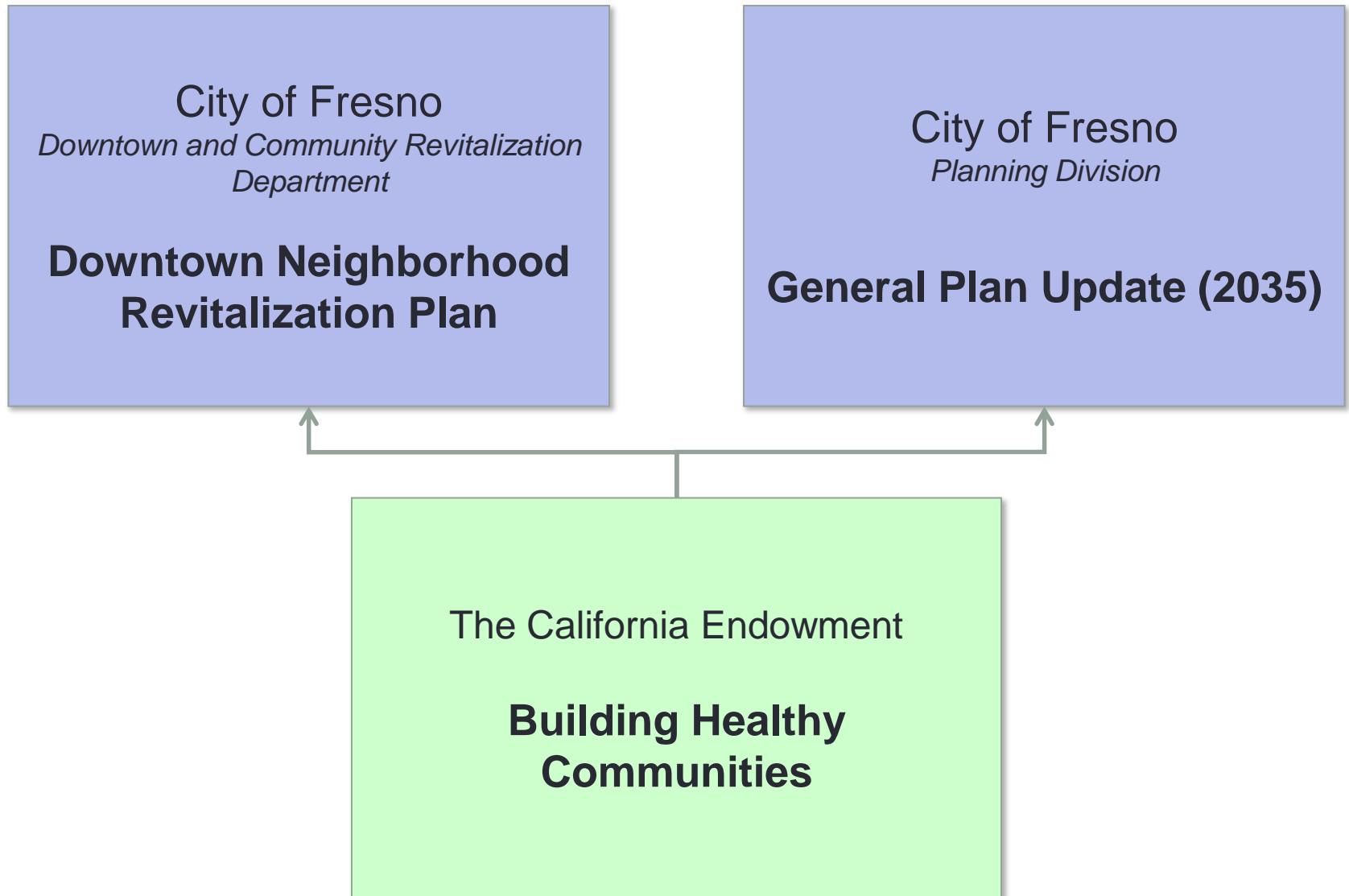
1974 General Plan

- The Neighborhood Councils fed into Citizen's committee for the General Plan Update

- Strong resistance to counter further sprawl and focus development downtown

- Planning Commission and City Council dismissal of committee and residents' preferences

GENERAL PLAN
FRESNO - CLOVIS METROPOLITAN AREA

EXISTING LAND USE

-4-

Dissertation Case Studies

Community Engagement in the Downtown Neighborhoods Community Plan

- Citizens Advisory Committee
- Stakeholder workshops (spring 2010)
- 1 week charettes (spring 2010)
- Few community meetings
- 4 hearings of the CAC
- Planning Commission and Council workshops

- Optimism from Staff and Consultants:
  - During Stakeholder Meetings with Community Leader from SW:
    "This is going to totally transform Southwest Fresno!" – City Staff

  - During the Charettes
    "We want to see inclusionary zoning, job training and a local hire ordinance" – resident comment during the Charettes
    "See this is great, this is exactly the kind of ideas we want to hear" – Stefanos Polizoides

DNCP Outcomes

• In fall of 2010, consultants put out an administrative draft with a lot of the ideas from community, including local hire, rent control, inclusionary zoning, etc.

• "Don't worry, we took out all of the socialist elements of the plan" – City staff, spring 2011

• BHC began to organize in spring 2011
  • Action meeting with Mayor and city councilmen
  • Comments on the plans
  • Tried to reintroduced many of the policies removed by the city

Failures in Communication leads to Distrust

- Discounting concerns
  - In response to concerns about gentrification and displacement:
    - "It is not the City's intention to gentrify neighborhoods. The City strives for healthy, vibrant mixed income neighborhoods through this planning effort." – Written response to comments

- Reframing Social Issues with Physical Solutions
  - "What is the goal of all of this? It seems like a plan to fix streets, but that's not our problem. We need businesses. We need jobs." - SW resident

  - "Well, businesses actually do care about streets." – City Staff

"This process has lacked community involvement. It has been overwhelmed by City staff and their views." Booker T. Lewis, member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee, October 25, 2011

Community Engagement in the General Plan

- Citizens Advisory Committee
- Stakeholder workshops (spring 2011)
- Concept papers + 9 public workshops
- Numerous meetings between Bergthold and community groups
- Community workshops on plan alternatives, chapter drafts
- CAC, Planning Commission and Council workshops

Participation Ambiguities

- Lack of clarity on the purpose of engagement

  During a neighborhood workshop:

  - "How exactly can we provide input?" – Community organizer
  - "We have specific policy proposals, so if you go into the Working Papers [500+pages] available on our website, it would be great to get your feedback on that" – City Staff

  After a neighborhood workshop:

  - "It's more of the same. I feel like we're being talked at and around. It's more community education, not engagement."

  - "To bring in masses, okay, maybe it will impress somebody that there's lots of people there, but we know in fact that some of those messages really aren't absorbed. It might be good for the media, big numbers, but to get the goal of what you want, you really need to work at it slowly and build relationships."

General Plan Outcomes

- "The community pressing us as policy makers on our knowledge of planning, Smart Growth, and infill policies was pivotal. I met with folks from the Building Industries Association, their voice has been overpowered by community groups and advocates." - Fresno Councilmember Oliver Baines (2/8/2013)

- "Organizations got themselves educated and started showing up at meetings. When you have a third of your city living in concentrated poverty, when you get them involved that can change everything." - Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin (2/8/13)

Distributive versus Procedural Justice: *Is Inclusion Enough?*

- From the beginning (see BHC logic model) the goal was education and inclusion in the planning *process*

- It took time for the community to develop concrete asks, which was often too late in the planning process - *timing is crucial*

- Even when concrete asks were made, community voice was clear, and participation in meetings was strong, this often was not enough

Reflections on Community Engagement in Planning

- Equity concerns are driving a community engagement in planning in Fresno, but perhaps it's not what's driving the City's community engagement efforts

- Leadership matters

- Planners and consultants over-sold the plans and the role of the community in the development of the plans

- Poor communication (e.g., dismissing concerns) lead to distrust and adversarial relationships

- A sense of co-producing the plan and inclusion were key to gaining support for Plan A from community groups

Some Questions to Consider

For City Staff/Consultants

- What is the purpose of engaging the community and in what concrete ways can they contribute?
- How can technical information be translated for consumption of different groups?
- How will community perspectives be included in the plan?
- If community priorities are not included, what is the reasoning and how will it be communicated?

For CBOs/Advocates

- What is are the community's values and visions for change?
- How can community priorities be translated into concrete asks of technical decisions?
- Whose voice is being represented?
- What are the best uses of people's time and effort?
- What relationships can be built and how?

Thank you!

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