

## Stockton City Limits

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# Report: Demand for infill development rising while support for sprawl wanes in Central Valley

Posted by [David Garcia](#) · January 24, 2013 · [1 Comment](#)

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Anyone who follows this site knows that I strongly advocate for smart growth policies, infill development and walkable communities with a mixture of various residential, retail and commercial uses. However, I have noticed that while generally supportive of these concepts, many believe that no one in Stockton wants to live in these areas, or that Stocktonians only want to be secluded in their big cookie-cutter subdivisions on the outskirts of town. I have repeatedly argued against this line of thinking, and some new research has emerged to support my stances.

Yesterday, the Council of Infill Builders, a non-profit organization advocating for infill development in California cities, released a report titled "[A Home for Everyone: San Joaquin Valley Housing Preferences and Opportunities to 2050](#)." The report finds demand for sprawl in the Central Valley has reached its peak, and the region should instead strive to accommodate rising demand for apartments, townhomes and condos in walkable areas. These findings are striking, and should give city leaders and developers alike a big wake up call regarding what valley residents want and where they want it.

New research shows demand for sprawling subdivisions has peaked, while support for other housing types has increased

Here are some of the key findings from the report:

**Central Valley residents increasingly favor apartments, condos and townhomes with better public infrastructure:** Since 2008, consumer preferences for apartments, condos and townhomes have steadily risen amongst valley residents. By 2050, these types of developments need to make up 45% of new construction to keep up with growing demand. Support for improving public infrastructure options, such as bike lanes, buses and sidewalks, is also increasing.

**Residents are increasingly in favor of saving farmland from residential development:** Not coincidentally, valley residents continue to reject the notion that new homes must be built over

greenfields. In 2012, 76% supported farmland preservation over residential construction, an increase from an already-hefty 67% in 2008. This finding is particularly important as the American Farmland Trust estimates current growth patterns will lead to the loss of 570,000 acres of Central Valley farmland by 2050, costing the region's agricultural economy between \$100 and \$190 billion.

**The region's existing supply of large-lot single family homes may already be sufficient to meet demand until 2050:** An analysis on demand trends against existing housing stock concludes that as demand for sprawl-type housing stagnates, our current inventory of large-lot housing is so extensive that that is has already met expected demand in 2050 (read: we have oversupplied McMansions so much that we have achieved market saturation for the foreseeable future).

**Central Valley residents want mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods just as much as the rest of the state:** The notion that valley residents simply prefer sprawl more than their peers in other parts of the state is unfounded. 37% of valley residents would prefer to rent or own an apartment or townhome with amenities within walking distance and a shorter commute. The average for the rest of the state was 39%, virtually the same.

These results illustrate the region's growing apathy towards suburban growth and increasing desire for smart growth-type development. And this isn't just 40 years from now. The Council's data shows that there is already existing pent-up demand for apartments, townhomes, and condos in the region. Today, 35% of valley residents prefer some sort of attached housing, though these housing types makes up just 29% of the market (and it's my guess that within this 29%, most units are in areas of high poverty (thank you, zoning!) meaning the actual stock of attached housing that residents prefer is much lower than 29%.)

Yet even as residents begin to show greater affinity for a mixture of housing types, most respondents ultimately still aspire to the big house with the sprawling yard. In fact, 84% said they would live in a large-lot house (though this number is unchanged from 2008 while all other housing types increased in popularity). However, saying you would live in a big house doesn't necessarily mean that you can. Because mortgages will never be recklessly handed out as they were in the mid 2000s, the report estimates that 45,992 households that may want big houses won't actually be able to afford them, meaning they will instead require less expensive attached or small lot housing.

In addition to housing, the report also notes that valley retail space will need to grow by 80% by 2050. If city planners and officials are smart, they will steer this retail into more compact areas within the city, creating a more efficient use of space. As I have explained before, compact retail and commercial development is incredibly more efficient compared to your typical strip mall or regional shopping center. The report suggests that this retail growth can be accommodated by reusing existing structures and infill. Even without reusing structures, there is no shortage of empty spaces within Stockton that are ripe for development. The San Joaquin Council of Governments has identified 141 infill opportunity sites— 81 in downtown alone— that present opportunities for infill development.

Stockton should revise planning policies to reflect new demand for apartments, townhomes and condos in walkable neighborhoods.

With the housing market still largely languishing, now is the time to revamp policies to refocus

growth inward. As other area cities slash building fees to jump start more sprawl, Stockton needs to take a step back and figure out what it wants for the future. Reducing fees for big developers is backwards thinking, and in the end won't help meet pent up demand for attached housing or bring much money back into city coffers. Developers have made a fortune paving over farmland, creating placeless, drab subdivisions that drained our city's budget and the city should make sure this kind of out of control greenfield development is never allowed again. Hopefully, the Council of Infill Builders report should help the city realize that reduced fees for subdivisions are wasteful as the city has enough sprawl: it's time to invest in our older neighborhoods as well as downtown.

I have argued that smart-growth development is the clear choice for Stockton moving forward: it's more efficient, better for the environment, better for the local economy, and better for the health of citizens. Now, we have strong evidence that Central Valley residents are increasingly embracing smart-growth development. The demand for better housing options and smarter communities is there and will only continue to grow. Cities must revise their policies to reflect this reality. Reducing permit fees for infill development while raising fees for development on farmland; streamlining permitting processes; revising zoning codes to allow for more mixed uses; eliminating burdensome requirements such as parking minimums. These are all steps Central Valley cities should take to spur infill development. If the city can't reprioritize growth patterns now, in the depths of sprawl-induced bankruptcy, when will it ever happen?

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January 28, 2013

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