New jobs or good planning? Fresno can have both in proposed industrial park

A new 110-acre industrial park is planned for this vacant land at the northwest corner of Central and Cedar avenues in southwest Fresno. At the time this photo was taken, a new order-filling warehouse for Amazon.com was under construction in the background. That warehouse is now operating.

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It took longer than it should have, but the city and a group of residents finally arrived at the...
right place when it comes to a proposed industrial park in southwest Fresno.

Developer Richard Caglia agreed to withdraw his proposed 2.1 million-square-foot project on Central Avenue from city review so a full environmental impact report could be done. When completed, the report will determine how best to ease the air, water and traffic concerns of the people living along Central between Highways 41 and 99. Those neighbors banded together as a group called South Central Neighbors United.

Mayor Lee Brand admits the process proved to be a learning experience. “We need to do it right,” Brand says of the EIR. “I’m not going to shortcut anything on this deal ... My posture is not to cram anything down anybody’s throat.”

It took the South Central Neighbors suing the city over its approval for the Caglia project to reach this moment. The 110-acre Caglia project is proposed just east of where the new Ulta and Amazon fulfillment centers have opened. Brand helped lure those businesses to town, and their giant warehouses have been touted by the mayor as proof of his commitment to create new jobs in Fresno. The Caglia development would be more of that.

The land falls into the South Industry Priority Area, a part of town that for decades has been targeted by the city for industrial growth. Small neighborhoods and a mobile home park were allowed along Central years ago when the land was under county control. The land was later annexed into the city.

Today some of those homes have failing septic systems and water wells that ran dry in the last drought. Add all the new truck trips expected on Central with the warehouses plus associated air pollution, and it’s not hard to see why residents would be concerned.

Also in the area are Orange Center Elementary School and several churches.
Adding muscle to the South Central Neighbors’ lawsuit was the state Attorney General’s Office, which joined the litigation and now pledges to monitor the process. Then there is a newly constituted City Council. Just elected District 3 Councilman Miguel Arias pledges to ensure the process is conducted legally and with the interests of the residents ahead of any companies.

Brand promises that the EIR will identify impacts and ways to limit them. Public hearings will be held, and residents will be able to share their views, he said.

Asked if he was willing to sacrifice a neighborhood for the greater good of economic development, Brand said: “My goal is not to sacrifice anything.”

That is welcome news to Veronica Garibay, co-director of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability. The Fresno-based advocacy group represented the South Central Neighbors in working with city officials.

“We hope the city will meaningfully engage community residents and there will be a fair and transparent process in place,” she said.

It is too bad that it took a year for the city to realize a full EIR needed to be done. Brand said city officials were relying on one completed in 2014 when Fresno’s overall master planning guide, the general plan, was adopted. The new EIR will cost $550,000 and will be done by year’s end, Brand said.

Having to wait on the environmental report means delaying Brand’s goal of creating new jobs through employment at Caglia’s industrial park. Brand said the city has already talked to three prospective tenants who would bring about 3,500 jobs. But while such hiring is valuable to Fresno’s never-ending quest to lower unemployment, getting the project reviewed properly and rightly addressing the impacts is also important.

That is true for another environmental review the city has started on 6,000 acres destined for industrial development. Brand promises full public participation in addressing impacts identified in that plan.

When it comes to good planning, there can be no shortcuts. It is good the mayor took that
When it comes to good planning, there can be no shortcuts. It is good the mayor took that lesson to heart with the Caglia project.

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What a waste of a year. If things had been done right the first time construction could have started by now. Mayor Brand you done F’d up. DON’T re-elect Lee Brand he is to developer friendly (he is one).

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