

EXISTING CONDITIONS AND NEEDS REPORT

MERCED DOWNTOWN STATION AREA PLAN

NOVEMBER 3, 2025



SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

PURPOSE

This report sets a foundation for the creation of Merced's Downtown Station Area Plan (DSAP), by considering existing conditions and future needs. It is a working document in that information will continue to be received, and integrated as the DSAP is developed. The report focuses on key issues important to the development of the DSAP. Community members and other stakeholders are encouraged to comment on its contents at <https://imaginemerced.com/>, where more information about the project can be found as well.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

A long-range planning document, the DSAP will inspire and drive change in central Merced, which includes Merced's Downtown, a future train station with high speed rail service, areas north of Highway 99 that surround Downtown and the future station, and portions of South Merced, as described in **Figure 1: Plan Area within Merced**, and **Figure 2: Key Features in the Plan Area**, and **Figure 3: DSAP Sub-Areas**. The DSAP will provide comprehensive guidance across a wide range of issues. It will consider, among other things:

- the revitalization and enhancement of Downtown,
- infill development for housing and jobs,
- multimodal transportation improvements,
- public realm enhancements,
- economic development programs, and
- infrastructure needs.

REPORT ORGANIZATION

This report compiles analysis that has been performed by a consultant team led by WRT, as part of the MGPU project led by Mintier-Harnish. The report is comprised of the following sections:

- an introduction and overview, including a summary of key considerations (by DSAP consultant, WRT with contributions from other members of the DSAP consultant team);
- an assessment of land use and community design factors, including current policies and analysis of land use, rail station concepts, open space, development opportunities, and other considerations (by DSAP consultant, WRT);
- an assessment of market and economic development factors, including advantageous and challenges, and considerations informing land use decisions;
- an assessment of mobility and transportation factors, including traffic, parking, pedestrian movement, bicycling, and transit (by DSAP consultant DKS);
- a due diligence survey of infrastructure, including water, wastewater, and stormwater.

Introduction and Overview

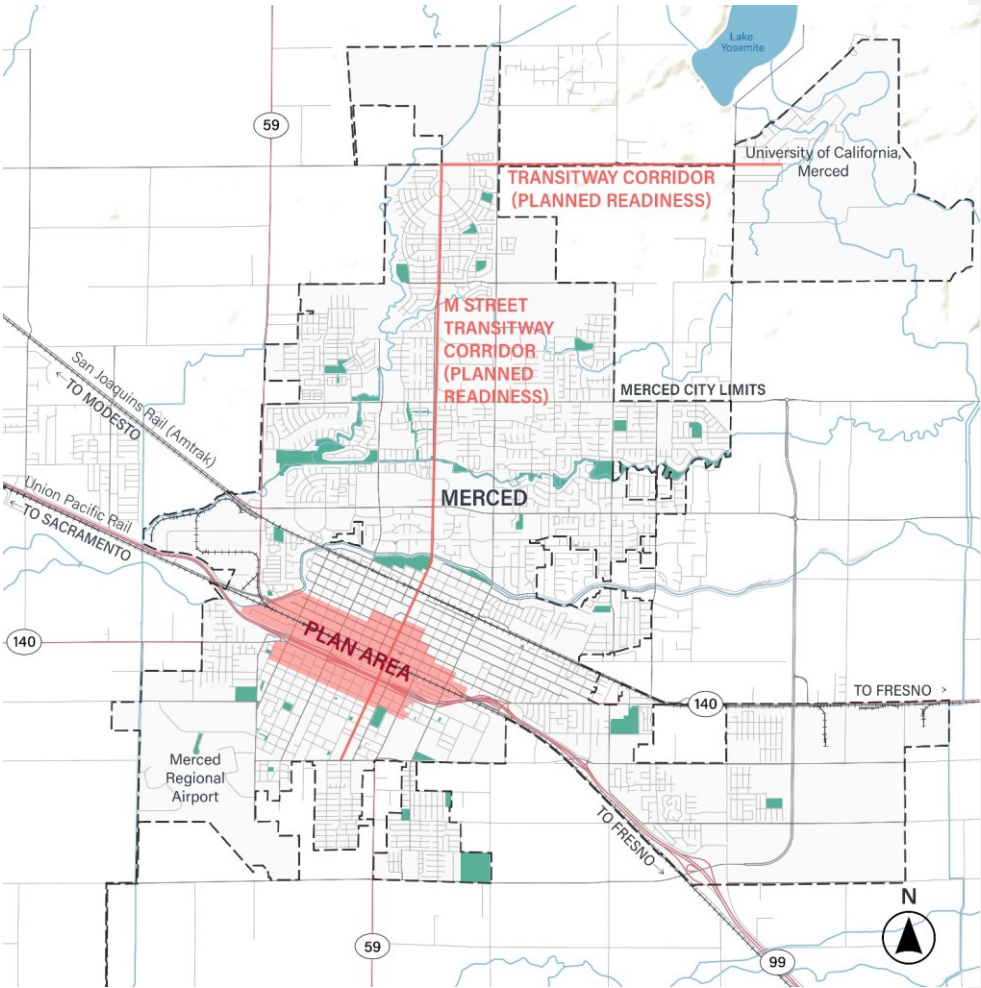


Figure 1: Plan Area within Merced

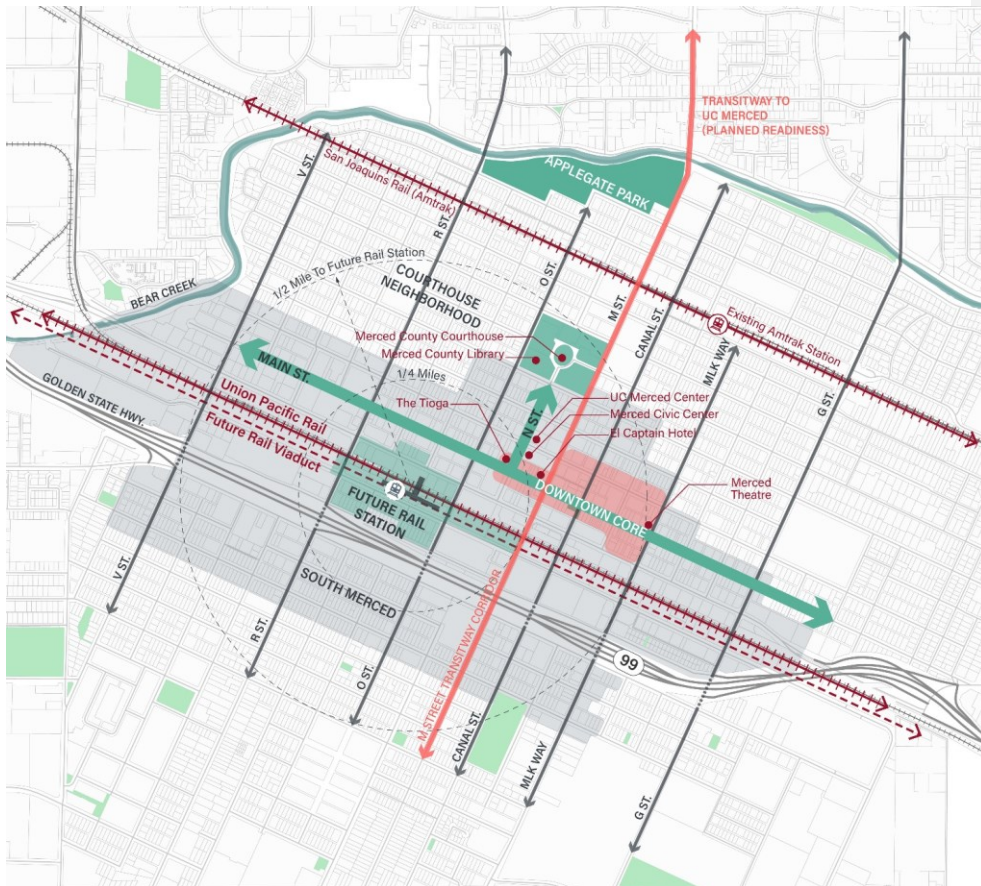


Figure 2: Key Features in the Plan Area

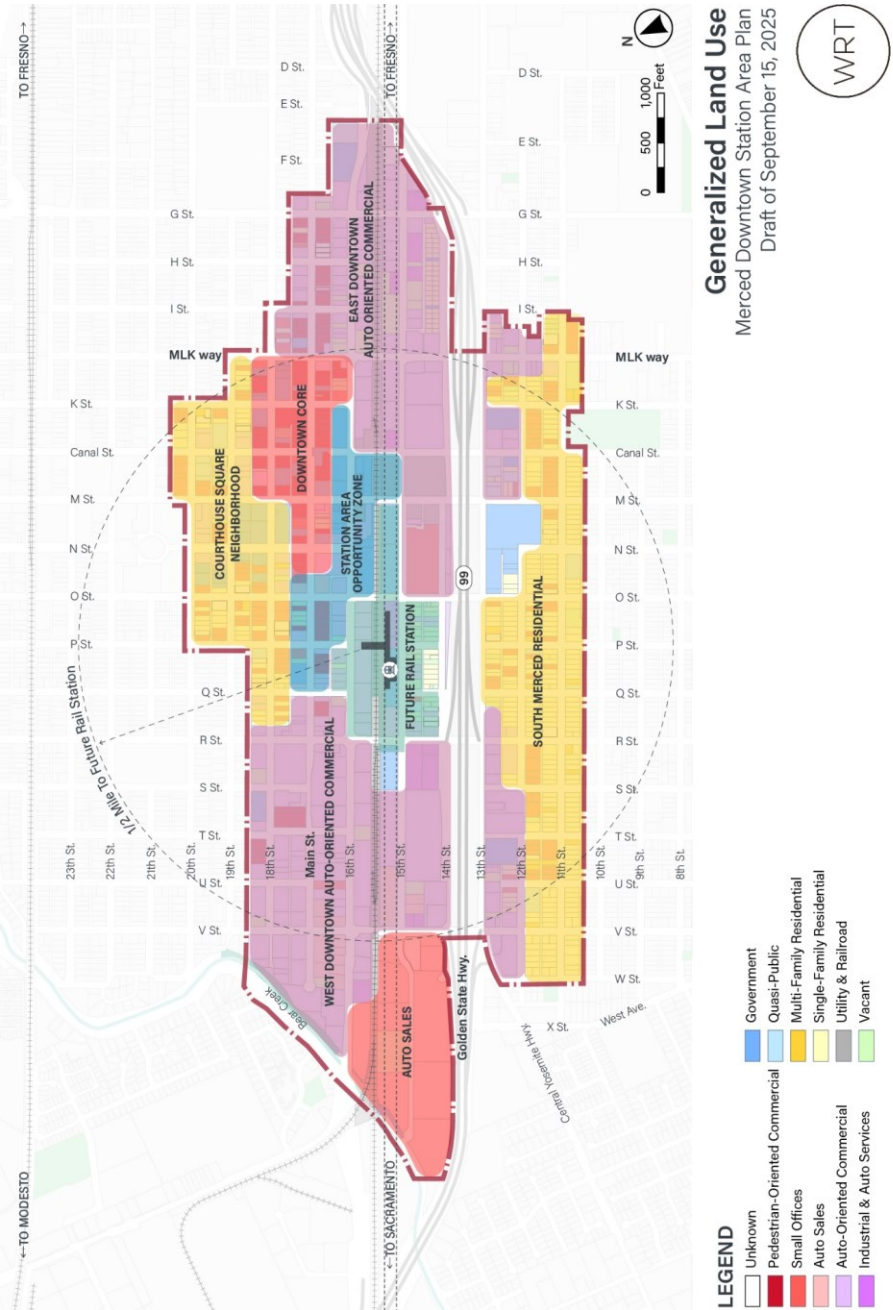


Figure 3: DSAP Sub-Areas (Generalized Land Use)

PHOTOS OF DOWNTOWN SUB-AREAS

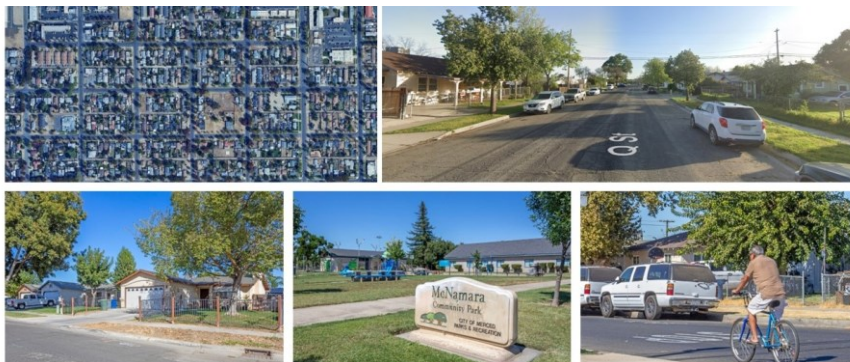
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Downtown Core



Courthouse Square Neighborhood



South Merced Neighborhood

Introduction and Overview



Auto-Oriented Commercial

REPORT ORGANIZATION

This report compiles analysis that has been performed by a consultant team led by WRT, as part of the Merced General Plan Update (MGPU) project led by Mintier-Harnish. The report is comprised of the following sections:

- an introduction and overview, including a summary of key considerations ;
- an assessment of land use and community design factors, including current policies and analysis of land use, rail station concepts, open space, development opportunities, and other considerations;
- an assessment of market and economic development factors, including advantages, challenges, and considerations informing land use decisions;
- an assessment of mobility and transportation factors, including traffic, parking, pedestrian movement, bicycling, and transit; and
- a due diligence survey of infrastructure, including water, wastewater, and stormwater.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following section highlights principal planning-level issues to consider during development of the DSAP. These points are elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this report, within more detailed assessments of conditions and considerations.

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Land Use and Community Character

WRT serves as land use and placemaking specialist for the project, and prime consultant for the DSAP team, which captures fundamental aspects of the place itself. Key takeaways in this realm include the following.

Existing Policies and Regulations. Established policies set a solid foundation for the DSAP and are aligned with best practices among planning professionals. Established policies emphasize:

- housing diversity and affordability;
- walkable access to local destinations and transit;
- pedestrian-friendly streets and street-oriented buildings;
- re-use of vacant and underutilized parcels; and
- a special sense of community-driven place.

Established policies also pertain to Downtown as a:

- preeminent commercial and cultural destination;
- center of finance, employment, government, and education;
- great residential neighborhood;
- place of opportunity for small businesses, entrepreneurs, and innovation;
- transit-oriented center for the city;
- economic center that capitalizes on future high speed rail service; and
- superior and distinct human-centered experience.

Zoning regulations are also in keeping with best practices, but important land use metrics may need to be reconsidered, such as height limits. Zoning does not use objective language in many places and is, therefore, an inexact expression of intended development character.

Existing Land Use. The Plan Area is comprised of characteristically different sub-areas in terms of their existing land use and development potential. The Downtown Core and other sub-areas are discussed in the next section of this report.

Historic character. The Plan Area (See Figure 1) has a strong historic identity because of architecture and tree-lined streets of the Downtown and the Courthouse Square Neighborhood. Many noteworthy older buildings have yet to be evaluated to determine their historic merit and potential for historic designation.

Parks and Open Space. Most of the Plan Area has proximity to parks and other recreational open space, if public access to school facilities is factored, but access to neighborhood parks is limited. Bear Creek presents an opportunity for linear open space.

Development Potential. The future rail station with high speed rail service may promote new infill development. Underutilized land between the future station and Downtown is especially noteworthy in this regard. Aging and other underutilized commercial and industrial uses east and west of the Downtown Core present additional opportunities for infill development.

Market and Economic Development

Introduction and Overview

The Natelson Dale Group (TNDG) evaluated market and economic development conditions and needs, as they relate to the DSAP. Key findings by TNDG are summarized here.

Economic Development Considerations

Established Strengths. In many respects, the Plan Area is thriving based on observed economic activity and recent development projects. This is especially true in the Downtown Core and Courthouse Square Neighborhoods. Freeway access also contributes to economic vitality in the area, as evidenced by Costco and relatively newly constructed drive-thru businesses.

The Downtown Core is a major visitor destination with multiple cultural destinations, with nearly one-third of the city's hotel rooms. Attractions include the Merced Multicultural Arts Center, the Merced Theatre, the Mercado, the Art Walk, Playhouse Merced, the Mainzer Theater, and weekly farmers' market. The walkable human scale, historic character, and architecture of the Downtown Core and Courthouse Square Neighborhood add to their attractiveness. Stakeholders noted the importance of maintaining continuous storefronts with few parking lots or other interruptions.

The Plan Area serves as a major employment center with nearly one-third of the city's office space. In addition to employees, City and County government facilities bring visitors, who at times remain in the Area to shop and dine. Similarly, Merced College, UC Merced, and other educational destinations in and around the Plan Area, bring students and other potential retail/restaurant patrons.

Synergies with UC Merced. Existing and future connections with UC Merced add to the development potential of Downtown. While the Downtown Campus Center building has been used primarily for administration, it is also used for visitor events and community programs. UC Merced is also opening a space on Main Street for adult education and other extension programs, for which there is a growing need. Merced College provides education and training for a variety of fields, including a downtown Business Resource Center.

Workforce Development and High Speed Rail. Workforce development will play an important role if Merced is to capitalize on future high speed rail service, which will better integrate Merced with the Bay Area and the rest of California. High speed rail connections to urban centers in the Bay Area and Southern California, and ultimately Sacramento, will potentially be a significant economic catalyst for the region. This project has the potential to connect inland economies with higher wage innovation centers on the coast. As originally planned, the initial alignment from Merced to Bakersfield would connect the DSAP area with the other major urban and academic centers of Fresno and Bakersfield. When service ultimately opens into the Bay Area, Merced would have direct one hour service into the firms, labor force, and investment of the technology-rich Bay Area economy. The current three-hour drive would collapse into a one-hour train ride.

Comprehensive Planning. The DSAP offers an opportunity to develop a comprehensive economic development strategy in which the eventual whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Economic development and market feasibility can be integrated tools available to the City – not just economic development programs but also land use and zoning reforms, destination parking and multimodal access, placemaking, etc. Furthermore, the planning process offers an opportunity to work with community stakeholders who will have interest in the Plan Area, such as merchants, cultural venues, developers, community service providers, transportation agencies, UC Merced and other educational partners, among others.

Land Use and Market Factors

Housing Demand and Product Types. The North San Joaquin Valley (NSJV) housing market is expected to increasingly favor smaller-lot single-family development and higher density multi-family housing. The broadening spectrum of housing types relates to a broadening range of demographic groups living in and around Downtown, such as the UC Merced community, Bay Area transplants, young professionals, and artists.

New Options for Merced's Workforce. Regional economic development initiatives and integration with the Bay Area economy have the potential to transform the NSJV economy, broadening the range of career opportunities for Merced's workforce. While Downtown Merced will not be the driver of these positive regional changes, it is well-positioned to harness and leverage them. Downtown is a historic and sizable employment center with advantageous educational resources, urban amenities, and sense of place. Downtown's mix of offerings is similarly advantageous to residents, which represents a potential market niche.

Strategic Institutional Investments. UC Merced – a key economic engine for the larger NSJV region – is a major stakeholder in the Downtown's future. UC Merced has satellite facilities in the Downtown with plans to increase educational and community programs. Furthermore, students value the Downtown as a "college life" amenity, and faculty and staff are among Downtown's residents. This connection can support retail/restaurant/entertainment businesses and activate streets for a vibrant downtown.

Positioning as a Cultural Destination. The well-established and growing concentration of arts/cultural facilities and activities in Downtown is another unique advantage. This rich mix is attractive and brings residents and visitors who also support Downtown businesses. Cultural destinations draw visitors from throughout Merced, the Valley, California, and beyond, and complement Merced's position as "gateway to Yosemite."

Intercity/Inter-Regional High Speed Rail. Noted trends have strong momentum independent of HSR, the potential station would have a positive influence on each of the driving factors considered above: integration with the Bay Area's economy, attraction of higher-paying jobs, demand for diverse housing types, and increased tourism and visitorship.

Placemaking Matters. Placemaking is people-centered attention to public spaces to be vibrant, engaging, and functional. Downtown Core and Courthouse Square Neighborhood are widely appreciated by community stakeholders for their human scale and pedestrian-friendly streets. Other sub-areas lack the same tree-lined streets and engaging architecture, but could over time as infill development occurs and public investments are made; doing so would enhance livability in the area and distinguish it within the NSJV marketplace.

Mobility and Transportation

DKS Transportation examined transportation conditions and needs of the Plan Area and evaluated information to provide a better understanding of where the area faces challenges. Highlights of this assessment are provided here.

Pedestrian/Bicycle Connectivity. Complete streets, where the needs and comfort of pedestrians and bicyclists, are vital as they are foundational to the revitalization of Downtown, connecting homes and

Commented [LB3]: Was this acronym previously defined. If not, define it.

Commented [LB4]: Same comment. This is fine here, if previously defined in prior paragraph.

Commented [LB5]: If we are going to use terms like this we should define them for the average reader. I think "placemaking" if Planner jargon, that our readers won't understand.

Commented [MT6R5]: Placemaking does not always involve community process, such as if private development creates a well-designed plaza.

Commented [LB7]: This sentence feels awkward. Most streets in Merced are tree lined with various architectural styles. Let's focus on seeing the community from a place of positivity. Not what we don't have, but what we do have that sets us apart.

Commented [MT6R7]: Noted. Hopefully this honest critique is acceptable as written.

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Introduction and Overview

jobs to local destinations, supporting urban development that is not car reliant, integrating South Merced with areas north of Highway 99, and leveraging future high speed rail service.

A significant number of street segments in the Plan Area have “high stress” scores for pedestrian and bicycle Levels of Stress (LTS), which influences pedestrian and bicycle connectivity in that relatively few pedestrians and bicyclists are willing to cross or move along High Stress routes. Levels of Stress are elevated in locations where:

- North-south arterial roadways connect directly to Highway 99 on- and off-ramps. These north-south arterials include G Street, Martin Luther King Jr. Way (MLK), R Street, and V street.
- M Street, while not directly connected to Highway 99, has higher traffic volumes as it connects the area to the larger city.
- East-west arterial roadways connect to Highway 99 and serve as a parallel route. These east-west arterials include 13th Street, 14th Street, and 16th Street.
- The part of Main Street between Bear Creek and N Street west of the Downtown Core.
- Notably, all routes between the Downtown Core to the Transit Center (and future High Speed Rail Station) are interrupted by High LTS.
- Additionally there are few streets with low traffic volumes that connect South Merced to areas north; these low-volume connections include O, M, and Canal Streets, which are accompanied by freeway underpasses.

Commented [MT10]: Bicycle LTS summarized along side of pedestrian LTS because they are nearly the same.

Commented [MT11]: M Street does not have a freeway ramp and has been given its own bullet.

Commented [MT12]: Bicycle LTS now integrated above.

Multimodal Performance of 16th Street. The transportation needs of the community place enormous demands on 16th Street. It serves as the local parallel route to Highway 99 and distributes freeway traffic onto and from local streets. Furthermore, it is lined by car-oriented businesses with separate curb cuts and turning movements, and some businesses benefit from the drive-by visibility and access that 16th Street affords. One block north, Main Street benefits from the access that 16th Street provides to parking lots and structures.

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Across and along 16th Street, pedestrians and bicyclists experience challenging environments. In its present form, 16th Street separates the Downtown Core from the existing Transit Center, planned rail station, and South Merced. The DSAP should consider the ease with which pedestrians can cross 16th Street, which has five lanes of traffic. Furthermore, vehicle speeds along 16th Street put pedestrians and bicyclists are higher risk, as average speeds for passenger vehicles exceed 50 miles per hour.

Commented [MT14]: Replacement of “planned rail station” by “DSAP” was rejected.

16th Street is also an arrival route for buses and the Transit Center and will serve as the front door to the future HSR Station where access by bus, car, bicycle, and on foot, will occur.

Downtown Access. Parking and circulation play a vital role in the functioning of Downtown as a commercial and cultural destination. As one reason for its success as a place, Downtown is a pedestrian-oriented zone, and many Downtown patrons arrive from the Courthouse Square Neighborhood on foot.

Most people arrive to Downtown by car, for which there is on-street and off-street parking. Public parking is in the form of surface parking lots and garages. DKS has gathered an inventory of parking, which will inform future recommendations.

High Speed Rail Station Access. High Speed Rail (HSR) service will create major new portal to Downtown and the rest of Merced. HSR service -- combined with Altamont Commuter Express service and Amtrak service -- will need to integrate local transit service and regional bus routes, as well as

passengers who arrive by car. Pick-up and drop-off (PUDO) curbs must also be accommodated, for which potential new autonomous vehicles may increase demand. Pedestrian and bicycle connections that extend from the Station will be of vital importance to connect to Downtown and encourage redevelopment of underutilized land in the Plan Area.

Infrastructure

Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group has provided a high-level “due diligence” assessment of existing water, wastewater, and stormwater systems connected to the Downtown Station Area – encompassing just over one square mile. This assessment summarizes the status of this infrastructure within the DSAP and identifies preliminary considerations for planning purposes. Additionally, regulatory context has been described to help guide work that may be needed to implement the DSAP but goes beyond the cursory assessment provided.

Water. The water supply for the Plan Area and city is managed by the City’s Public Works Department. Historical data from the 2012–2016 drought, the driest five-year period on record, showed no reduction in groundwater production, supporting the assumption that supplies will remain reliable during similar drought conditions in the near term. While the City acknowledges that future conditions could pose long term risks to water supply reliability, they are not of a nature that limits growth in the Plan Area. Water pipes are another consideration and many pipes in the Plan Area are cast iron and ductile iron that were common in the 20th Century, for which the City has established programs for their modernization.

Wastewater. The City owns, operates, and maintains its wastewater collection system. In most of the Plan Area, wastewater drains to a main trunk wastewater pipeline that aligns with P Street north of 15th Street and R Street south of 15th Street. There are no deficiencies in the existing system, though some lines have limited residual capacity, and development intensification in the Plan Area may contribute, in part, to a need for improvements.

Stormwater. The City’s Public Works Department is responsible for the operation and maintenance of the storm drain collection system. The City has three major storm drain outfall systems that serve the Plan Area. Parts of this system are undersized and can handle only between 2-year and 5-year storm events. The City divides areas with shared drainage outfalls into local watersheds. Nearly all of the Plan Area falls within two local watershed areas. The west portion of the Plan Area is served by a network of storm drains that discharge into Bear Creek at multiple points. Adjacent to Bear Creek and at the westmost point of the Plan Area, a detention basin captures some and releases stormwater into Bear Creek via a pump station. The east portion of the Plan Area has a local watershed flows into a trunk line that extends south along O Street.

The Storm Drain Master Plan identifies that the existing drainpipes within the DSAP do not have the capacity to convey the design flows. The Storm Drain Master Plan also states that the intersection of M and 21st Streets in the downtown area is not connected to any downstream system, causing runoff to accumulate and flood the area as water levels rise above the drain inlets.

A program of improvements will be needed to address flooding issues, and the City has plans to add additional pipes to help address the issue. In addition, street improvements in the Plan Area have the potential to include detention and other green infrastructure features.

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Commented [MT16]: I was not able to get more specific information regarding what the City’s modernization practices are, but this general statement is correct based, on the CIP, at a minimum.

Commented [LB17]: This sentence is awkwardly worded, I added onto it; however, did I get your meaning correctly. The WW service is divided in two by Bear Creek?

Commented [MT18R17]: I studied the stormwater map. The West Avenue line only serves a small part of the Plan Area, so the deleted sentence is an overstatement. The rewrite is more general and correct. BTW Bear Creek is a dividing line north of the Courthouse but not at the east edge of the Plan Area.

LAND USE AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER

GENERAL PLAN, ZONING, AND RELATED STUDIES

Merced's General Plan serves as a blueprint for growth and development in the City of Merced. The General Plan articulates goals and policies that are then implemented through zoning and other regulations, as well as public investments and programs. Much of the current General Plan was first adopted in 2012 and much was amended in 2015. As of this writing, the process of updating the General Plan is underway. DSAP goals and policies are expected to be adopted by reference as part of the updated General Plan.

Land Use Element

Goals and policies that are contained in the current General Plan Land Use Element and pertain to the DSAP include the following (for which some have been adapted for brevity).

Section 3.4.4

- Offer range of housing densities and types.
- Match housing opportunities with Merced's jobs and housing needs.
- Enhance existing residential neighborhoods and protect them from incompatible development.
- Encourage pedestrian-friendly residential environments with access to local destinations and transit.
- Emphasize quality of life and livability through design and land use relationships.

Section 3.5.6

- Create a diverse and balanced Merced economy.
- Encourage downtown vitality and reinvestment with a mix of uses, vibrant activity, and distinguished identity.
- Solidify Downtown's role as a preeminent arts, entertainment, and dining destination.
- Retain financial, office, and government uses Downtown.
- Encourage Downtown education and training facilities and activities
- Enhance connections to and from Downtown to the rest of the City, across all transportation modes.
- Create exceptional residential neighborhoods in and around Downtown.
- Increase employment opportunities, particularly high-quality industrial and research and development (R&D).
- Provide easy access from residential and employment areas to commercial destinations and conveniences.
- Create opportunities for small business development, entrepreneurship, and innovation.
- Create a superior appearance and ambiance Downtown to encourage commercial and cultural activity, and to attract investment.

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Section 3.6.3

- Encourage compact urban land use patterns that encourage people to walk, bicycle, or use public transit.
- Encourage infill development on vacant and underutilized parcels.
- Promote pedestrian-friendly development through street-oriented buildings and site design.
- Capitalize on the planned rail station near Downtown, which is expected to offer High Speed Rail service, such as with a “TOD Overlay Zone.”

Zoning Regulations

The DSAP will give guidance for zoning amendments to help implement its vision and policies. Zoning regulations limit how a property can be used, building position and mass, building and site design features, among other things. General Plan land use designations describe intended uses and characteristics for geographic sub-areas (see **Figure 4: Existing General Plan Land Use**), and these correspond to zoning designations (see **Figure 5: Existing Zoning Designations**). For zoning districts in the Plan Area, key standards are described in **Table 1: Existing Zoning Standards**.

Proposed development must comply with standards in Section 20.22.040 Urban Residential Overlay Zone. These standards address topics such as building orientation and design attributes for specified residential building types. Zoning in the Plan Area also includes Future Rail Station Planned Development (PD) for which the City has reserved zoning Section 20.22.030 High Speed Rail Overlay Zone, however no HSR Overlay standards have been adopted.

Many zoning provisions are not “objective standards.” The State defines objective standards to be those that involve no personal or subjective judgment by a public official and are uniformly verifiable by reference to an external and uniform benchmark or criterion available and knowable by both the project applicant and public official prior to a project application. Objective standards must be in place for review of housing project applications that qualify for streamlining under State law. In many communities, objective standards apply to all multifamily residential projects and mixed-use projects with residential units.

Housing Element

In California, Housing Elements are required to provide a coordinated strategy for preserving existing housing stock and advancing opportunities for new housing in a sustainable way that enhances quality of life and addresses housing needs across the economic and social spectrum. To do so, Housing Elements evaluate current needs and resources, address fair housing issues, identify potential sites for future housing, and recommend policies and statutory changes necessary for housing production. The City’s Housing Element update is under review as part of a Multi-Jurisdictional Housing Element (MJHE) coordinated by the Merced County Association of Governments. The draft Housing Element recommends no zoning changes specifically in the Plan Area for additional residential capacity.

Zoning District	Underlying General Plan Designation	Permitted Uses (not all permitted uses shown)	Residential Density	Building Height (maximum)	Front Setback
Regional/Central	Regional Community Commercial	retail shops & destination	n/a	No limit generally	0 feet

Land Use and Community Character

Commercial District		restaurants personal services offices hotels residential		60 feet adjacent to R districts	35 feet across from R districts
General Commercial	General Commercial	drive-thru building supplies equipment sales hotels residential		No limit generally 40 feet adjacent to R districts	0 feet
Thoroughfare Commercial	Thoroughfare Commercial	restaurants drive-thru equipment sales vehicle repair			
Office Commercial	Commercial Office	offices banks personal services			10 feet
High Density Residential	High Density Residential	multifamily duplexes	24-36 du/ac	35 feet / 2 stories	
High-Medium Density Residential	High to Medium Residential	ADU residential care	12-24 du/ac		

Table 1: Existing Zoning Standards



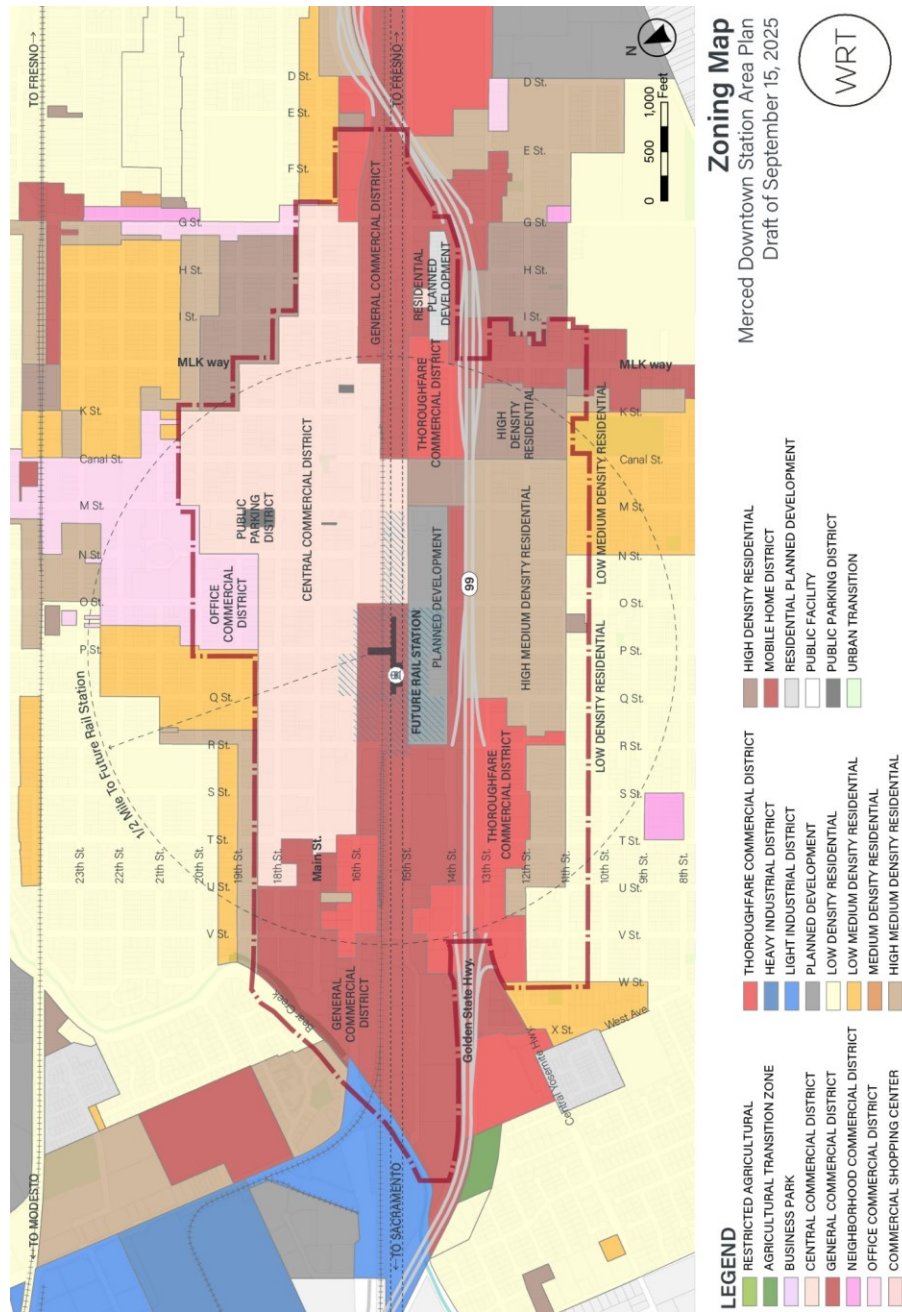


Figure 5: Existing Zoning Designations

Downtown Housing Feasibility Study

The Plan Area can be expected to play an important role in the production of housing at moderate to high densities, and at varying levels of affordability. To understand the capacity and potential limitations associated with infill housing in Downtown Merced, two City-owned parking lots were examined as potential housing opportunity sites in a “Downtown Housing Feasibility Study” (2023). Both projects assumed wood-frame construction (Type V) over concrete construction (Type I) to reach 6 stories and yield 108 to 130 dwelling units per acre, as illustrated in **Figure 6: Illustration from Downtown Merced Housing Feasibility Study**.

Notably, the building heights assumed in the Study exceed what is currently permitted by right, but could be achieved by a qualifying affordable housing project under California “density bonus” law or achieved by non-qualifying projects that succeed in obtaining a Conditional Use permit through a discretionary review process. The Study assumed subsidies for affordable housing such as the dedication of City land and State grant assistance, and costs associated with replacement of public parking spaces was not factored.

The Study did not consider the feasibility of market-rate housing using the assumed high-density residential building type. An assessment of residential development market has been provided by The Natelson Dale Group later following this section of the report.

Figure 6: Illustration from Downtown Merced Housing Feasibility Study



Downtown Strategy Reports

Land Use and Community Character

The current General Plan references Downtown Strategy reports that have been developed across several decades. Guidelines and goals from the Strategy reports include:

- solidify Downtown's role as the arts, entertainment and dining destination;
- maintain Downtown as the governmental and financial center of the City;
- expand commercial activity through additional office development, boutique recruitment and construction of an education center;
- create major anchor tenants throughout Downtown, such as the Downtown Cineplex, and a business class hotel;
- create a greater regional draw with freeway-oriented retail and major discount retail centers along the western side of downtown;
- increase community facilities including a youth center, senior center and arts center;
- strengthen the transportation system throughout the Downtown;
- create a superior ambiance;
- make Downtown an exceptional residential neighborhood; and
- connect Downtown to the rest of the community.

Most of these strategies have been translated into General Plan policies and actions.

Urban Design Element

As stated in the current Urban Design Element, a citywide goal is to promote environmentally and economically sustainable development where:

1. Housing, schools, shopping areas, and other things which meet most of the daily needs of residents are located within walking distance of one another.
2. Higher population densities are located around transit stops to provide the critical mass of people and activities needed to make transit economically viable.
3. Housing provides places to live for a variety of people within a single neighborhood.
4. Mixed-use and transit-friendly commercial and employment centers are promoted.

The Urban Design Element also contains Guiding Principles that pertain to the DSAP, which are adapted here for brevity.

Promote an urban form that integrates housing, shops, workplaces, schools, parks and civic facilities, and provides convenient pedestrian and bike access to transit, commercial, recreation and residential places.

Reinforce the elements of the community which give Merced its unique identity, through purposeful acts of community building and by conserving the special and most memorable qualities of existing neighborhoods and districts.

Reinforce the Downtown as a focus point in the City, in light of its social and economic role, its being the seat of County government for Merced County, Downtown supports a regional government center, and access point to regional highway and railway networks.

Open Space, Conservation, & Recreation Element and Park & Open Space Master Plan

Park improvements, new parks, and new trails will be considered during development of the DSAP. Of particular interest will be ways to better serve residential populations in South Merced and as may be generated as infill development occurs throughout the Plan Area.

The City is committed to provide for existing and future park and other recreation needs of the community and continuing high standards for park development. General Plan Policy OS-3.1 says, “provide high-quality park and open space facilities to serve the needs of a growing population.” This policy goes on to say that “no household should have to walk more than approximately one-half to three-quarters of one mile to a park site.” Policies also says that parks should be located adjacent to schools and designated bicycle facilities, where possible, and should have edges that front onto public streets for access and safety.

Merced High School District and the Merced City School District (MCSD), which serve the Plan Area, has a joint-use agreements with the City to allow public access to school recreational facilities, such as playgrounds, athletic courts, and gymnasiums. The agreements make facilities available to the public during non-school hours, however the school districts continue to have jurisdiction over their facilities.

The City’s Park and Open Space Master Plan (2004) helps to implement General Plan policies and sets a park service standard of 5.0 acres of parks per 1,000 residents, along with guidelines for park types as summarized in **Table 2: Park Types and Design Guidance**.

Service area guidelines describe the maximum distance within which residents are considered to be adequately served. Service areas may be limited by barriers to pedestrian movement, such as freeways and railroad segment without walkable crossings. As indicated in **Figure 7, Parks and Open Space**, existing park service areas cover most of the Plan Area, if public school facilities are assumed to provide service equivalent to a neighborhood park. The DSAP provides an opportunity to address park needs generally and especially park needs in areas that are outside of existing park service areas.

The DSAP can also consider ways to provide more direct access to a trail along Bear Creek, as indicated in Figure 7. The Bear Creek trail segment that abuts the Plan Area is part of a restoration effort that will repair trail improvements lost in recent flooding and enhance trail access. The intended trail will connect from 16th Street to points north and east.

Land Use and Community Character

Type	Facilities	Service Area	Size	Standard
Mini Parks	small playgrounds	0.25 miles	at least 0.5 acres	not applicable
Neighborhood Parks	combination playground and park designed for non-organized recreation activities	0.5 miles	at least 3 acres, optimum 5 acres	3.5 acres / 1,000 residents
Community Parks	organized for active and structured recreation, usually with ballfields	1-2 miles	optimum 15-20 acres	1.5 acres / 1,000 residents
Urban Plazas	passive generally hardscaped areas for passive recreation and public gatherings	n/a		
Greenways / Linear Parks	corridors along creeks and other linear features with trails and passive recreation			

Table 2: Park Types and Design Guidance

Sustainable Development Element

Land Use – Transportation Integration

The General Plan's Sustainable Development Element recognizes that land use and transportation can be arranged in patterns of development that result in less automobile use – by reducing distances traveled and making walking, biking, and transit use more convenient. Such land use - transportation patterns also generate less air pollution and less greenhouse gas.

Policy 1.3 says to encourage transit-oriented and pedestrian-oriented design principles, and increase street trees and other landscaped areas. It underscores the importance of trees for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is to minimize urban heat islands that increase health risks and to encourage walking as an alternative to car use.

Historic Resources

The General Plan's Sustainable Development Element Policy 2.2.d says to:

Support the preservation of the downtown's historically and architecturally significant structures. Encourage the design of new developments to be consistent with the design, character, and building bulk of the existing downtown. Encourage and support efforts to preserve historic structures in the Courthouse Square area, Downtown, Central Merced, and throughout the City.

In Merced, the Planning Commission also serves as the Historic Preservation Commission.

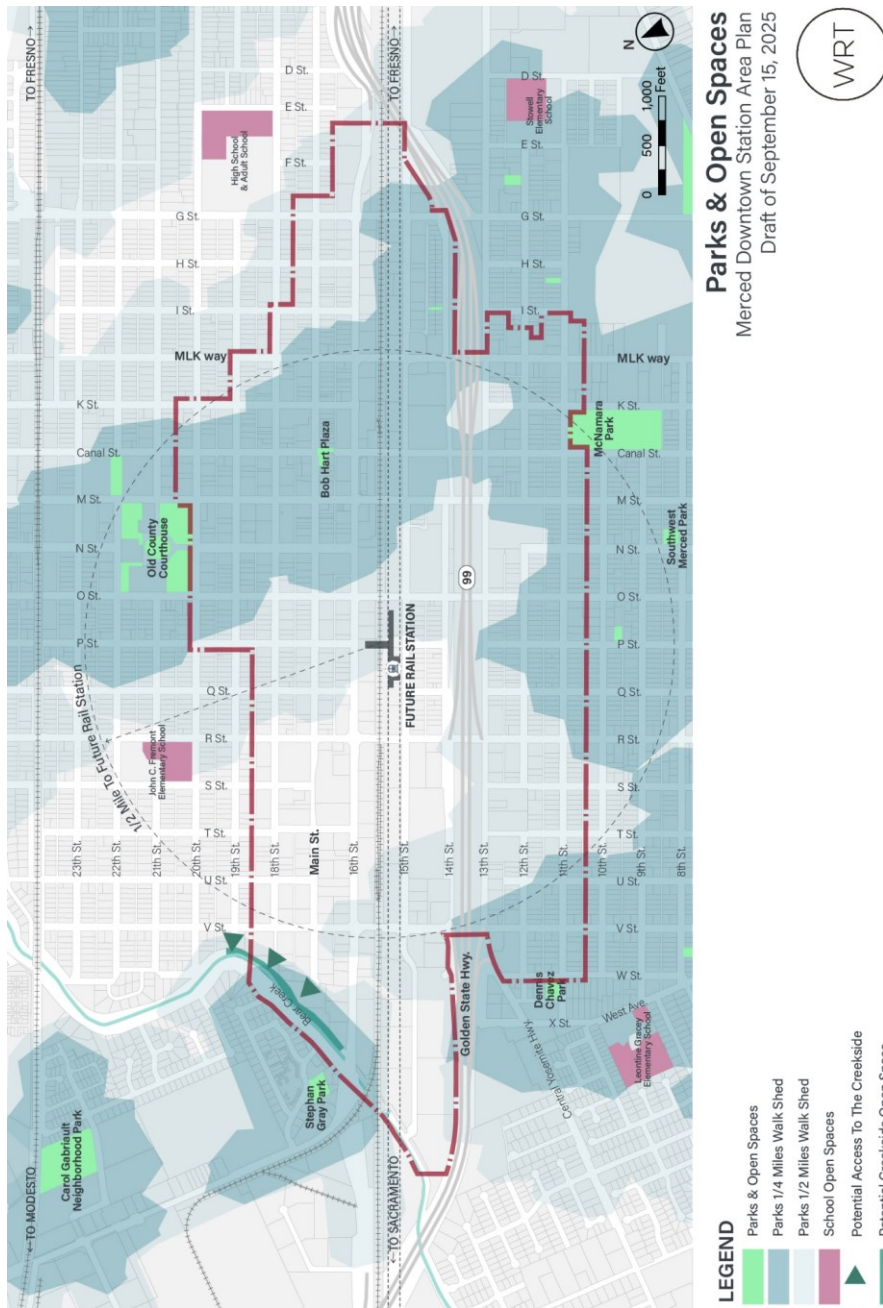


Figure 7: Parks and Trails

Commented [MT20]: PLEASE CONFIRM. Bear Creek trail will be shown to extend north. AI search suggests that it ends at 16th Street.

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CONDITIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Historic Character

The oldest parts of Merced include Downtown and parts of the Courthouse Square Neighborhood. The first railroad through Merced was the Central Pacific Railroad, a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad, which reached what is now the edge of Downtown in 1872. While a village grew originally near Bear Creek, a business district emerged near the railroad station,¹ serving the town and surrounding agricultural communities. Based on maps, the area between 11th Street, Bear Creek, G Street, and R Street, was platted in the 19th century, as depicted in **Figure 8: Merced in 1888.**² Merced's grid of streets indicates the general extent of the city as it entered the 1960s.³

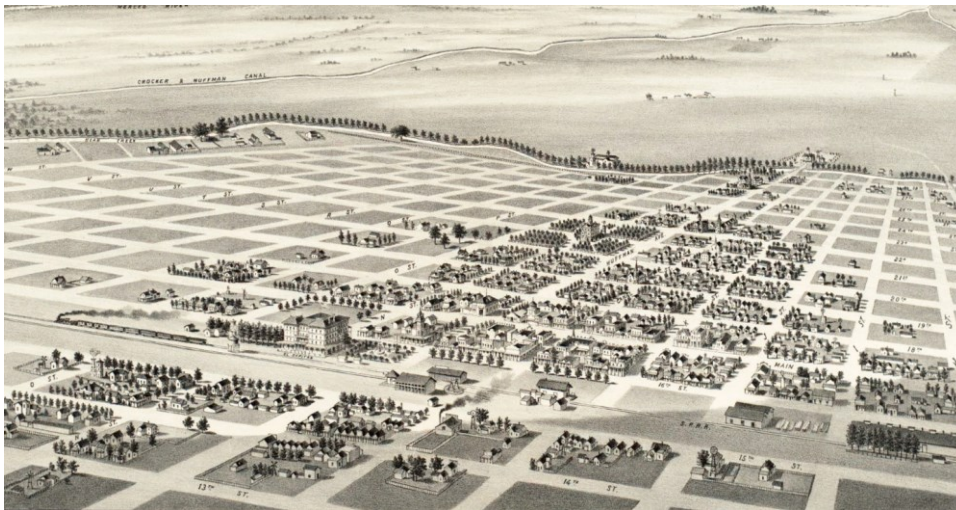


Figure 8: Lithograph showing Merced in 1888

The Downtown and the Courthouse Square Neighborhood are recognized for their historic character and charming architecture, and community members have worked to retain historic buildings and other characteristics. In the Plan Area, the Tioga Hotel, the Merced Theater, the Bank of Italy building (now the Merced County Office of Education), the Strand Theater (now the Mainzer Theater), and the former U.S. Post Office are on the National Register of Historic Places. Along with the historically significant, the El Capitan Hotel and the Mainzer Theater, these buildings have been renovated in recent decades, except for the Post Office. North of the Plan Area, buildings on the National Register include the Old County Courthouse (now Courthouse Museum) and several historic residences, such as the Major George Beecher House.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merced_station_\(Amtrak\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merced_station_(Amtrak))

² <https://www.ebay.com/itm/394003290022>

³ https://pastmaps.com/map/merced-merced-county-ca-usgs-topo-1961-p1963?srsltid=AfmBOopKWsUnHtfXXs6Ex57fVhol_TaCceFQPM2zRb_TqTELj4qZR_64#11.55/37.3085/-120.4254

While the Plan Area has other buildings that contribute to its historic character, no definitive inventory of designated or potential historic resources has been conducted, such as to use objective criteria from Secretary of Interior guidelines. That said, an unofficial inventory of noteworthy buildings has been compiled by the Merced County Courthouse Museum in collaboration with Merced County GIS Division.⁴⁴ Designated resources and other noteworthy buildings are identified in **Figure 9: Historic Resources and Noteworthy Buildings**.

Historical styles that predominate in the vicinity of the Plan Area include:

Mediterranean and Spanish Revival are influenced by vernacular architecture of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and southern France. Mediterranean style has features that respond to the arid and often hot climate of these places, such as deep openings and eaves for shade.

Classical Revival, including Italianate and Queen Anne, are characterized by a tripartite vertical organization of building base, middle, and top, horizontal composition of elements, and references to the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, such as columns and pediments.

Art Deco was popular in America's urban centers in the early 20th-century and emphasizes vertical and horizontal massing and lines that extend across and beyond the main building form.

Existing Land Use

The Plan Area is a diverse area from a land use perspective. It contains a mix of residential, industrial, public, and a variety of commercial uses. A parcel-by-parcel description of existing uses is provided by **Figure 10: Existing Land Use**. While some blocks are comprised of a dominant land use, a single block may have different land uses that vary with each parcel.

A more generalized depiction of existing land uses is offered in **Figure 3/11: Land Use Sub-Areas**. This high-level interpretation describes sub-areas within the Plan Area. The most recognizable sub-area is the Downtown Core. The **Downtown Core** is the heart of Merced's central business district and offers a wide variety of commercial and cultural destinations. The Downtown Core also features storefronts that line the edge of sidewalks and support pedestrian activity. Street edges that are lined by storefronts and other active uses are called out by solid lines in **Figure 12: Building Frontage and Pedestrian Activation**. The intersection of Main and Canal Streets is arguably the geographic center for the Downtown Core, and is abutted by Bob Hart Plaza.

Just north of the Downtown Core is the **Courthouse Square Neighborhood**. This sub-area includes a mix of residential homes, small offices, quasi-public uses like churches, and small parking lots serving other uses.

East and west of the Downtown Core are **auto-oriented commercial uses**, such as retail fronted by parking lots, drive-thru establishments, and automobile services. These uses capitalize on proximity to Highway 99 and the freeway accessibility it provides. These sub-areas also contain small light industrial uses, and some residential parcels are interspersed. These sub-areas have relatively low development intensity, i.e. parcels tend to have a lower floor area ratio than in the Downtown Core. Several

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⁴⁴ https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/d97d250e4c1444fb81b624acf7dfbaa6#data_s=id%3AdataSource_1-1813ec1eef8-layer-2%3A8

Land Use and Community Character

automobile sales establishments occupy the far west corner of the Plan Area, which generate significant sales tax revenues for the City.

The **future rail station area** is also indicated. The extent of this area is based on a design study developed by the High Speed Rail Authority – and an understanding of rail and transit design elements will be refined as part of the DSAP process. Blocks between the future rail station and Downtown Core have been called out to be a “station area opportunity zone,” in light of its development potential, however station-related development is not limited to this area. **Figure 12: Future Station Area and Its Context** identifies streets that will connect the station to the Downtown Core and notes the “M Street Transitway Corridor” where right-of-way has been reserved in North Merced as potential transit infrastructure to UC Merced.

The northern part of **South Merced** occupies the south part of the Plan Area, and is separated from the rest of the Plan Area by Highway 99. Single-family homes predominate in the South Merced sub-area. While there are auto-oriented commercial uses along the Highway 99 frontage road (13th Street), commercial destinations for local residents are absent.

Highway 99 and the **Southern Pacific Railroad tracks** are barriers to pedestrian movement and more integrated development. High speed rail trains will run on an elevated viaduct just south of the existing railroad. DSAP should consider different conditions in three east-west zones created by these barriers:

- north of the existing railroad and future HSR viaduct is the largest zone, containing the Downtown Core and other blocks with streets extending north without interruption;

- between the railroad/HSR and Highway 99 is a zone that can be expected to have more traffic, noise, and visual impacts; and

- south of Highway 99, the predominantly residential area has street connections extending farther south and presents an opportunity to be a more complete neighborhood with local destinations, such as parks and commercial conveniences.

North-south street connections cut across these three zones, which offer opportunities to enhance pedestrian and bicycle connections, especially along streets that cross the train tracks and pass under the freeway (and away from freeway on-/off-ramps – along O Street, M Street, and Canal Street.

The Plan Area also features **numerous public uses and services** on land owned by the City of Merced, the County of Merced, UC Merced, and local school districts, as described in **Figure 13 Public Land and Services**. Most of the City-owned land is near Merced Civic Center (City Hall), as well as along 16th Street (in the form of the Transit Center and public parking). Merced County Administration activities take place just north of the Plan Area. The City, County facilities offer numerous services in the Plan Area, such as the Boys & Girls Club, the Merced Senior Community Center, veterans services, and municipal services at the Merced Civic Center. Downtown is also the location for numerous educational establishments. Public parcels with surface parking lots present potential development opportunity sites.

Parks and Open Space

The entire Plan Area is less than one mile from a community and/or neighborhood park. The nearest community parks are Applegate Park (north of the Plan Area), McNamara Park (at the south edge of the Plan Area,) and Merced’s Youth Sports Park (south of Highway 99 and west of the Plan Area).

DSAP Existing Conditions and Needs Report

The Plan Area contains several small parks and plazas, as indicated in **Figure 7/14: Parks and Trails**. Parks inside or at the edge of the Plan Area include: Bob Hart Square, McNamara Park, Merced Youth Sports Complex, and the grounds of Courthouse Square which are used informally as a park. The northwest portion of the Plan Area is underserved by City parks, as it is more than one-half mile from a park, the City standard for park accessibility. However, this area is within one-half mile of Fremont Elementary School, which has a playground available to the public during non-school hours. Schools in and near the Plan Area include: Tenaya Middle School, Sheehy Elementary School, Stowell Elementary School, Gracey Elementary School, Fremont Elementary School, Merced Valley Community School, and Sequoia High School which shares its campus with the Merced Adult School and other schools. The DSAP will consider opportunities for new public open space, particularly in locations that may be underserved.

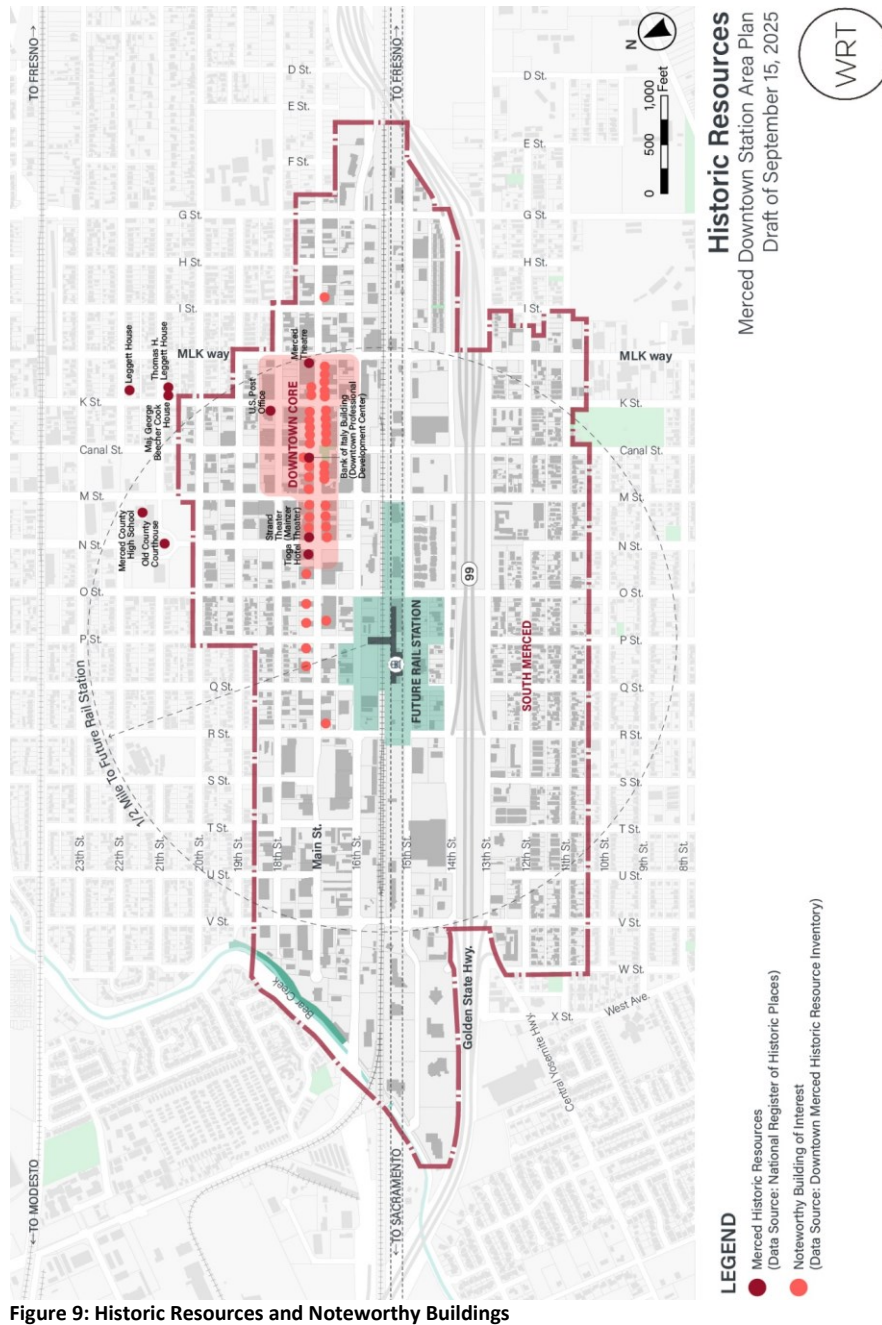
The DSAP will also consider ways to enhance access to a trail along Bear Creek, which is being restored after recent flood damage. The Parks and Open Space Master Plan Map, which appears in the General Plan, shows the Bear Creek corridor to be an “open space recreational” corridor from Applegate Park, where public trails and parkland already exist, along the west edge of the Plan Area to Highway 99. While access to Bear Creek is limited north of 19th Street, the 19th Street right-of-way offers direct access, and potential future access might be provided at the west end of 18th Street and Main Street. The DSAP will consider if a trail might be extended southeast to South Merced along Bear Creek.

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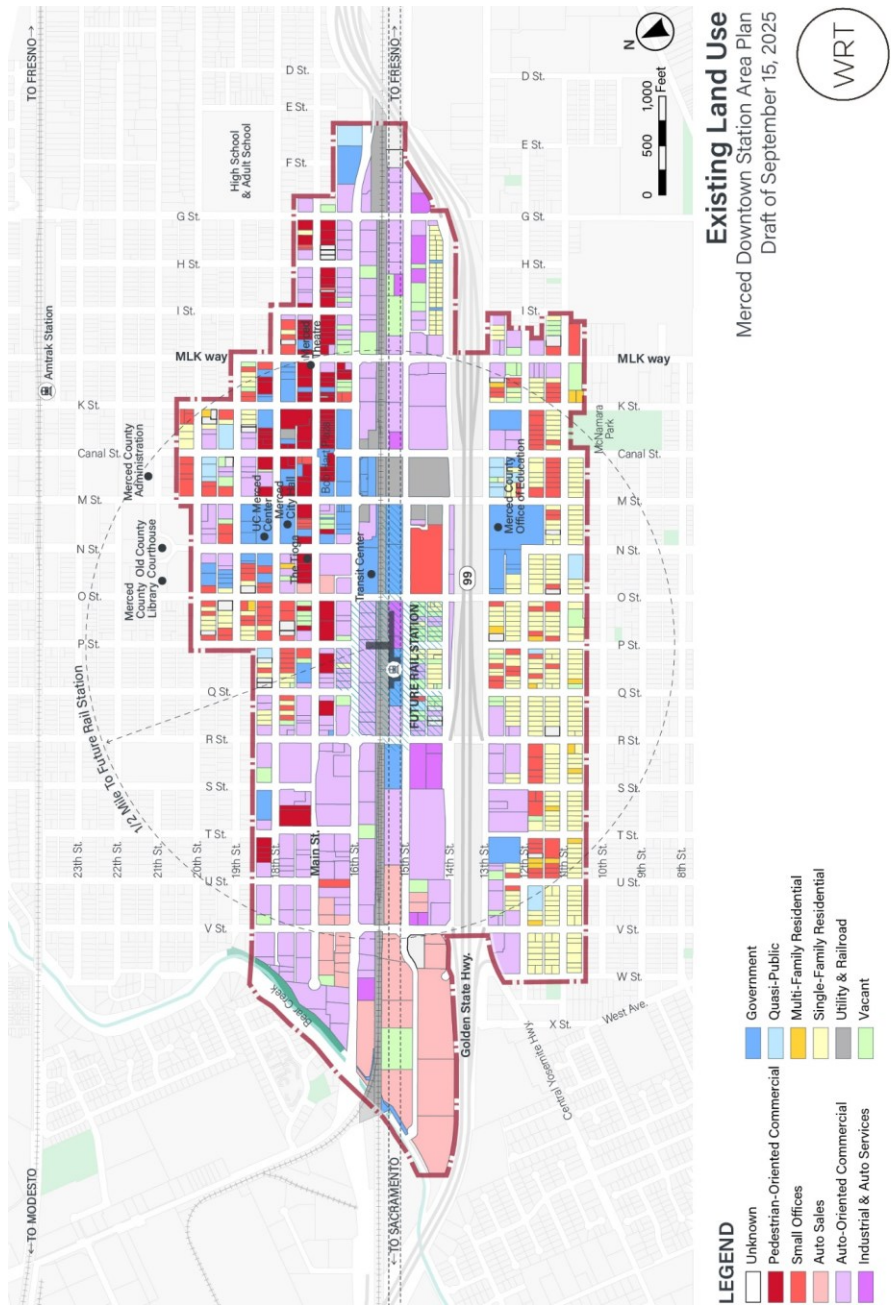


Figure 10: Existing Land Use

Land Use and Community Character

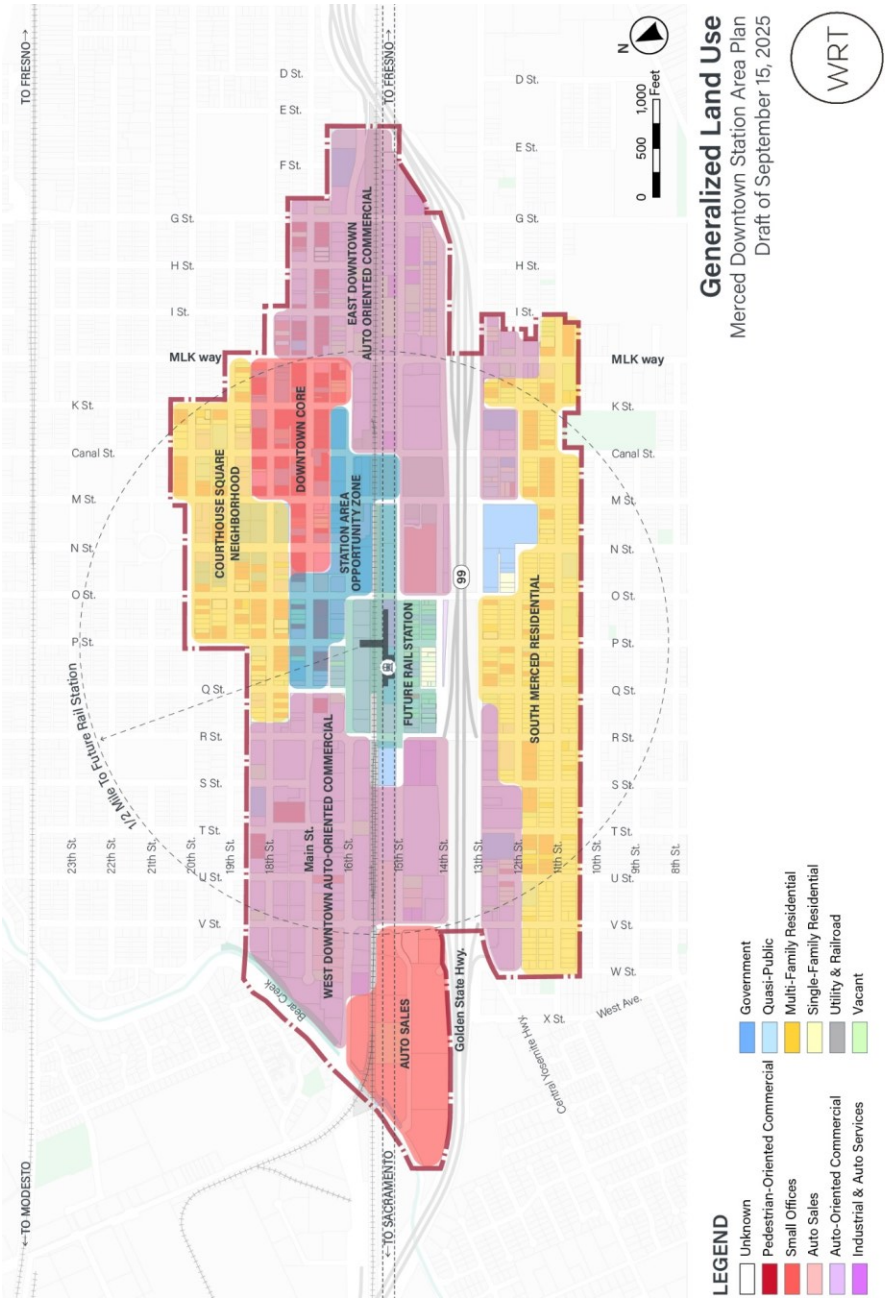


Figure 11: DSAP Sub-Areas (Generalized Land Use)

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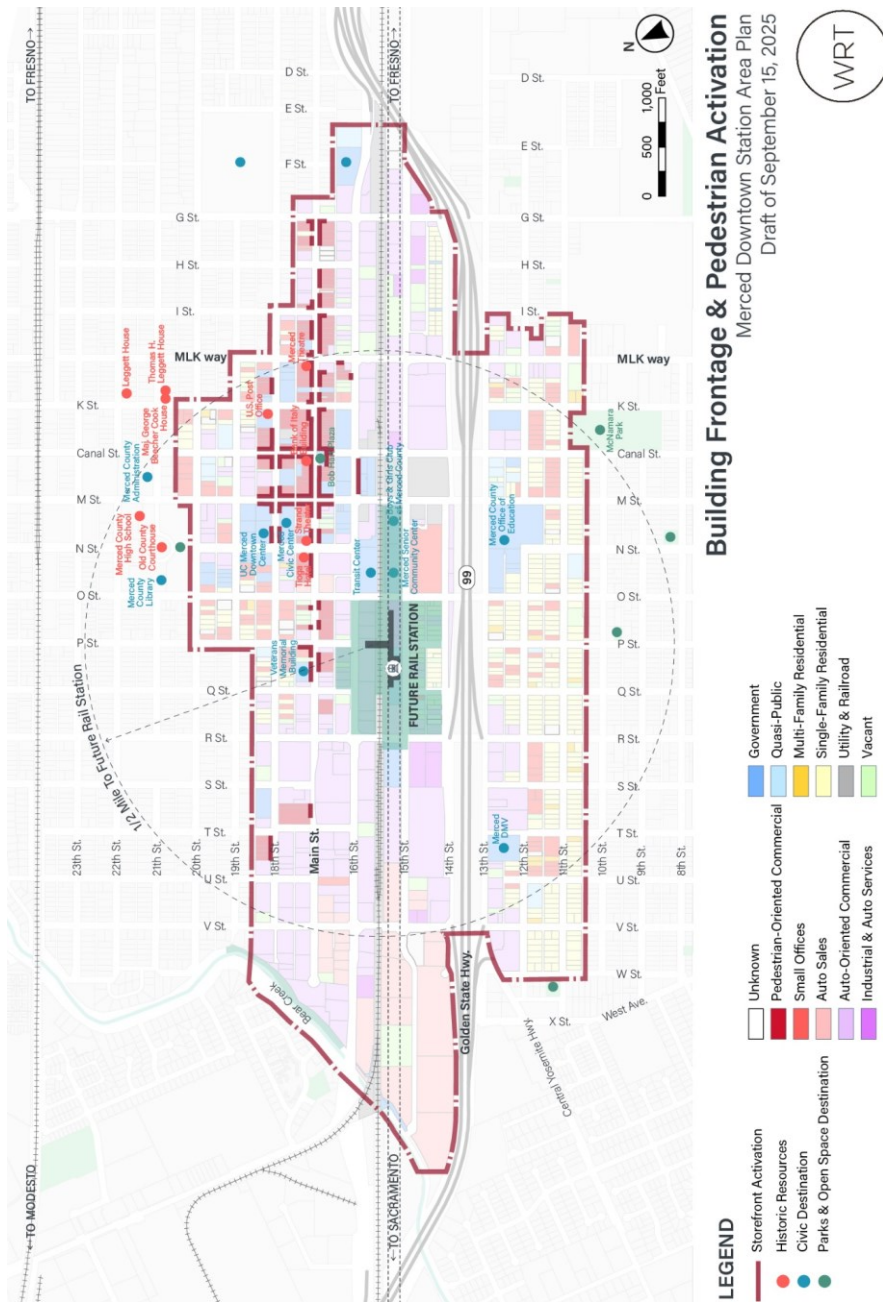


Figure 12: Building Frontage and Pedestrian Activation

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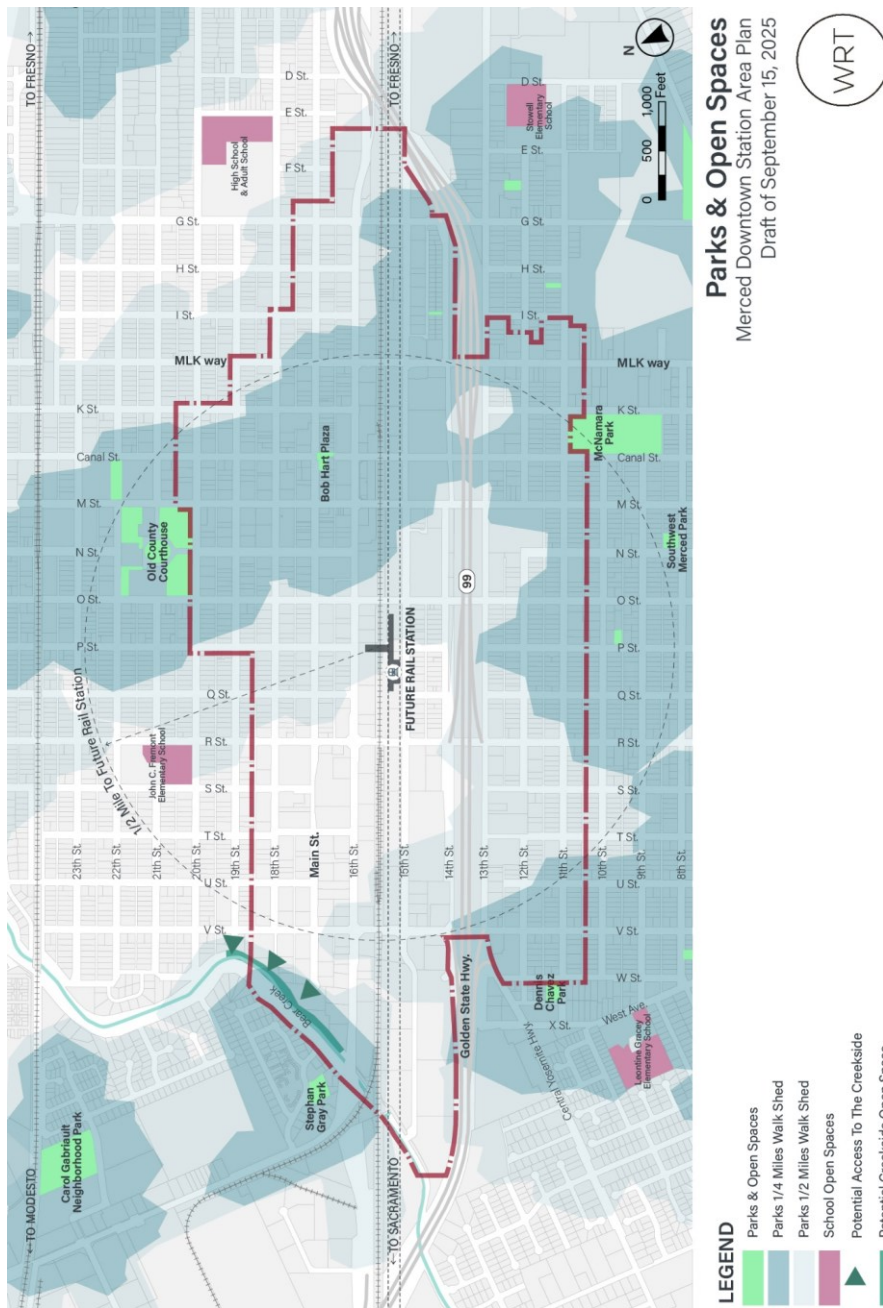


Figure 14: Parks and Trails

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Land Use and High Speed Rail

California High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) is proposing a new station at the edge of Downtown, which would also connect to San Joaquin Amtrak service, Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) service, and Merced Transit Authority bus service (The Bus). As shown in **Figure 15: Future Inter-Regional Rail Connections**, HSR service will ultimately connect Merced to the Bay Area and extend south to Los Angeles. ACE service will connect to the Bay Area via the Altamont Pass. High speed rail service will reduce travel times such that passengers who board in Merced will be able to reach San Francisco in about two hours.

The future rail station is proposed to be between O and R Streets. The principal entrance to the station would be from 16th Street, where rail passengers would ascend to access HSR service atop an elevated structure. **Figure 16: Plan Concept for Future Station** and **Figure 17: Cross Section Concept for Future Station** are diagrams developed by consultants for HSRA. The design of the station remains under development and environmental analysis for the new station has not been completed.

The HSRA describes its stations and surrounding blocks as “station communities” that will be transformed with economic growth, job creation, transit-oriented development, multimodal streets, and enhanced connectivity. HSRA has a stated goal to design stations and work with local partners to create community destinations, enhance the value of surrounding property, improve transit, and attract investment.

Transportation and economic implications of HSR service are discussed in the transportation and economic development assessments, which appear later in this report.

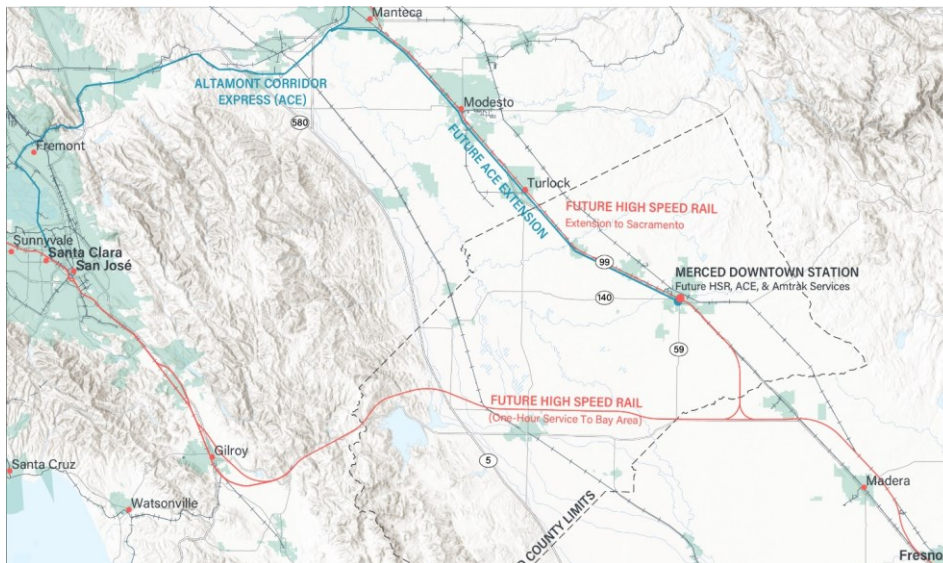


Figure 16: Future Inter-Regional Rail Connections

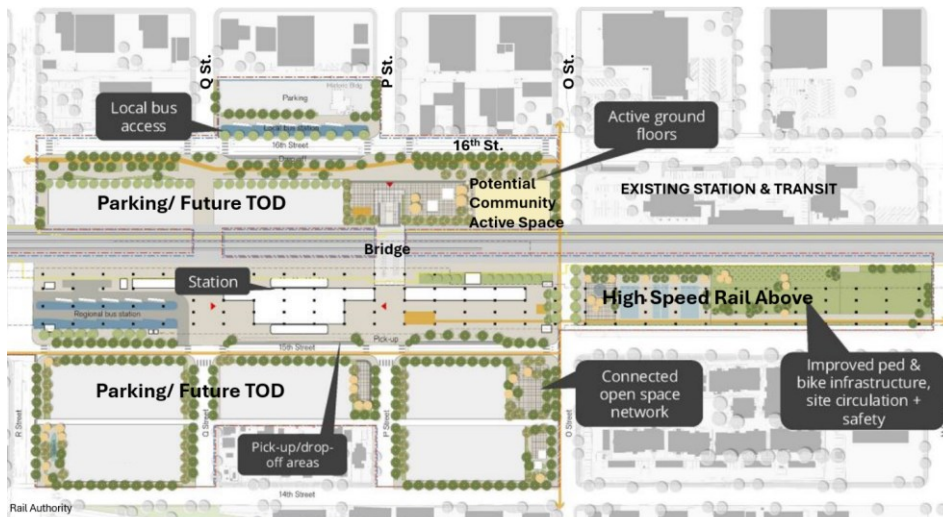


Figure 17: Plan Concept for Future Station

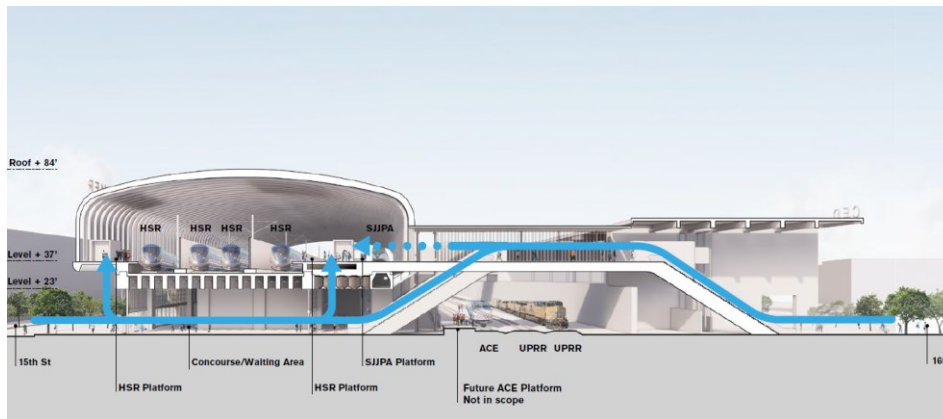


Figure 18: Cross Section Concept for Future Station

Development Potential

A general understanding of where future development might occur helps to inform planning in urban areas. At the same time, it is important to note that development is usually initiated and implemented by private investors, except for limited opportunities on land owned by the public and deemed to be “surplus.” Because the considerations that a developer may face are complex and occur over time, anticipating where development may occur is more art than science.

Land Use and Community Character

With these caveats in mind, two metric indicators can provide a general sense of where infill development might occur: a parcel's floor area ratio (FAR) and the ratio of a parcel's improved value to land value alone. Parcels with relatively low FAR indicate the potential for more floor area and therefore revenue generation. As indicated in **Figure 18: Floor Area Ratio**, the Downtown Core area has relatively high FAR because uses have little or no surface parking and many buildings are more than one story. Outside of the Downtown Core, commercial and industrial uses are more likely to be of lower development intensity on account of single-story buildings with surface parking that occupies most of the site. (The FAR threshold of 0.4 was selected for this analysis because development above this intensity is less likely to have a large surface parking lot.) Not all uses with lower FAR are candidates for redevelopment, such as single-family homes and commercial uses that generate significant revenue, such as Costco, auto dealerships, and popular drive-thru restaurants.

Another indicator of development potential is provided by the value of property tax assessments. Using data provided by Merced County's Assessor's Office, it is possible to compare the taxable value of a parcel's building (and other improvements) to the land value of the parcel by itself. When the value of the building is low relatively to the land value, then the worth of the building may be assumed to be relatively low. As indicated in **Figure 19: Ratio of Improved Value to Land Value**, the ratio of improved to land value indicates that development opportunities may be clustered west of the Downtown Core beginning around O Street, east of the Downtown Core beginning around MLK Jr. Way, and south of the Downtown Core along 16th Street and between the railroad and freeway. Note that the assessment map is only an indicator of a general pattern of underutilized land and is not a strict indicator of development potential. Also note that the analysis uses a numeric threshold for relatively low versus relatively high improved-to-land value, which made the general pattern of underutilized land more evident as compared with other numeric thresholds, and the threshold selected is not based on other criteria.

A generalized assessment of where future development might be concentrated is offered in **Figure 20: Generalized Development Potential**. The general extent of potential redevelopment zones is a qualitative assessment based on the FAR and improved-to-land value ratio indicators. As shown, potential for future infill development appears to be clustered in three sub-areas:

- within and north of the near the future rail station project area;
- west of T Street in the general vicinity of Westgate Shopping Center; and
- east of Martin Luther King Jr., Way where there are aging industrial and commercial uses.

The land use potential of the planning area is expected to change when high speed rail service shortens the time for business trips, recreational trips, commuter trips, and other trips to the Bay Area and LA regions. (See summary of existing conditions for market and economic development factors.)

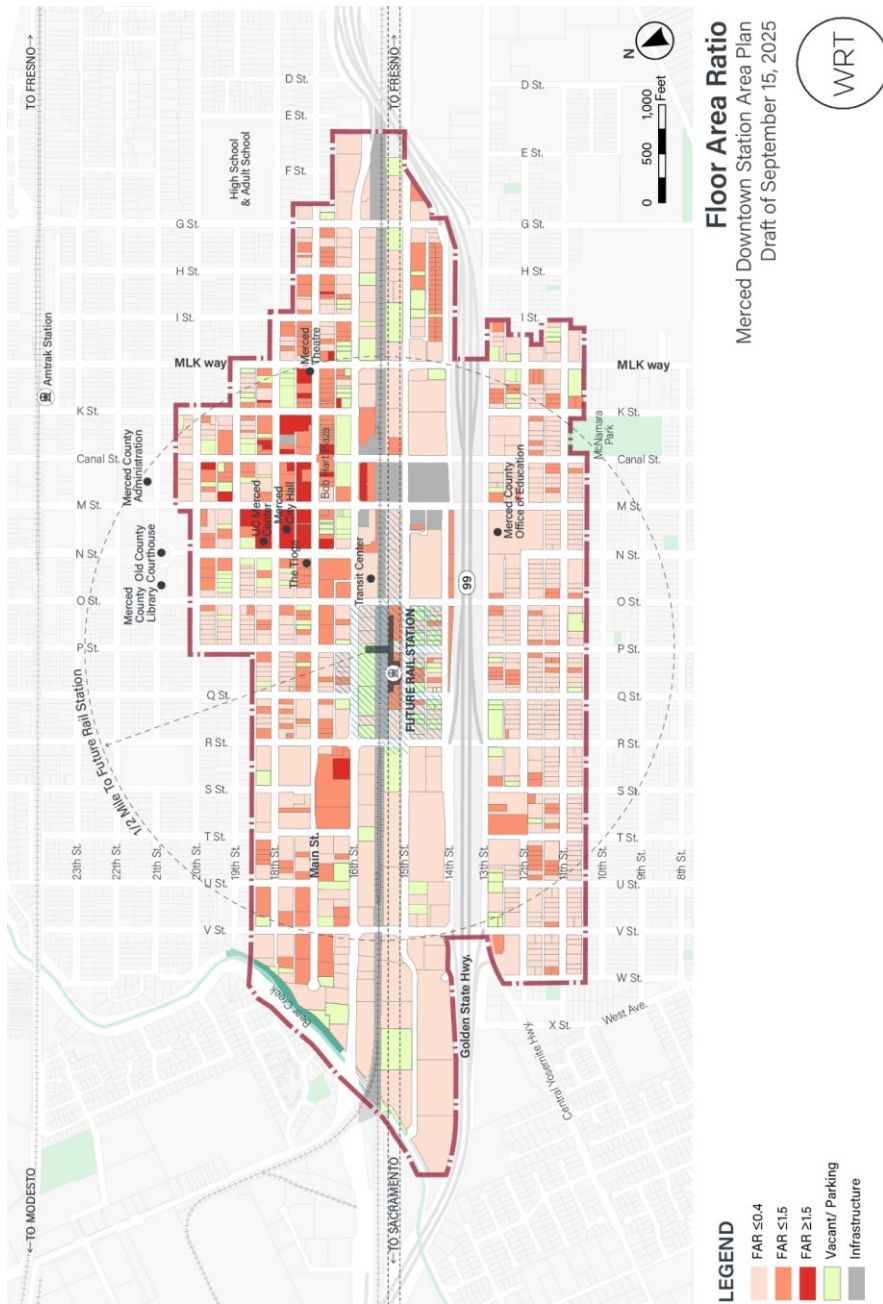


Figure 19: Floor Area Ratio (Merced County Assessor data)

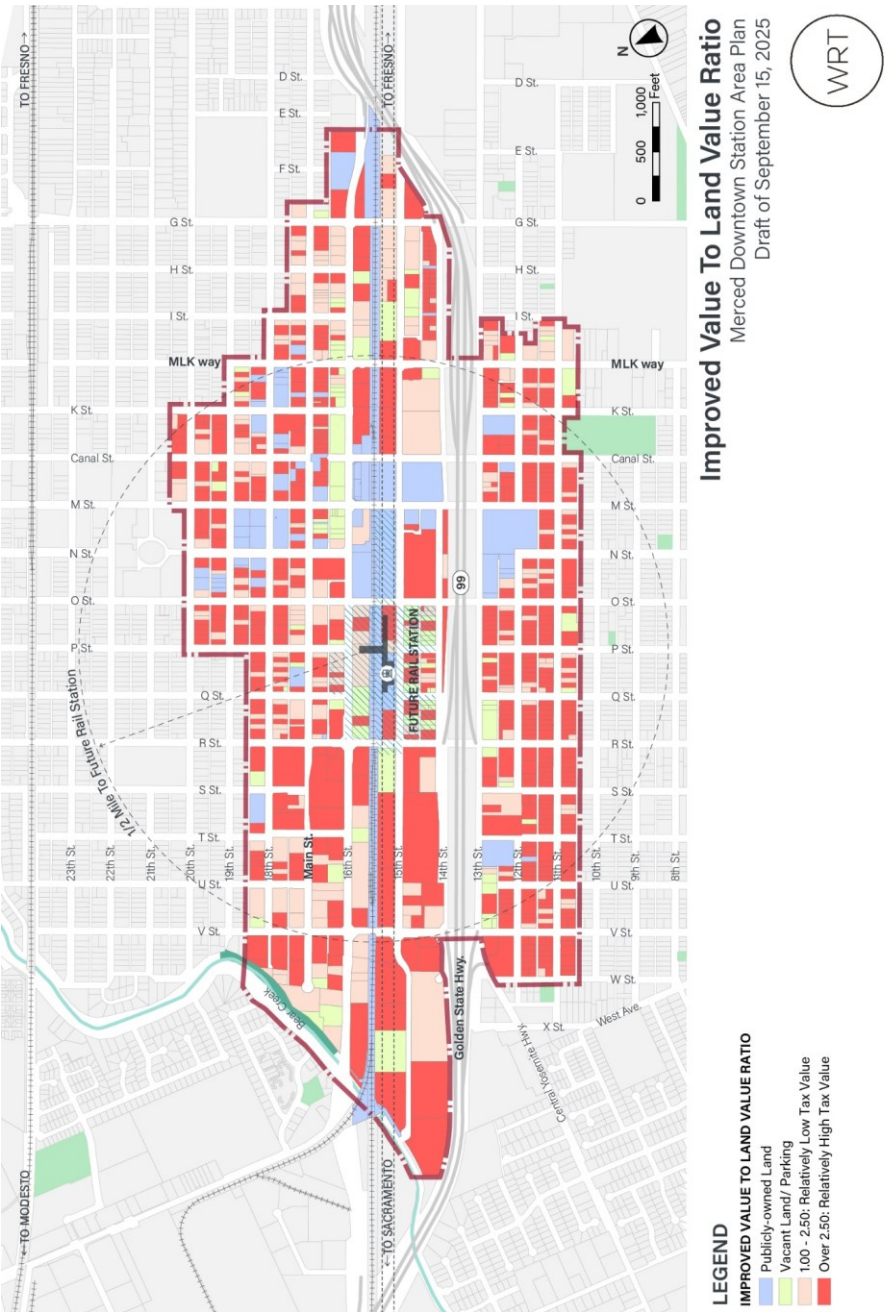


Figure 20: Ratio of Improved Value to Land Value (Merced County Assessor data)

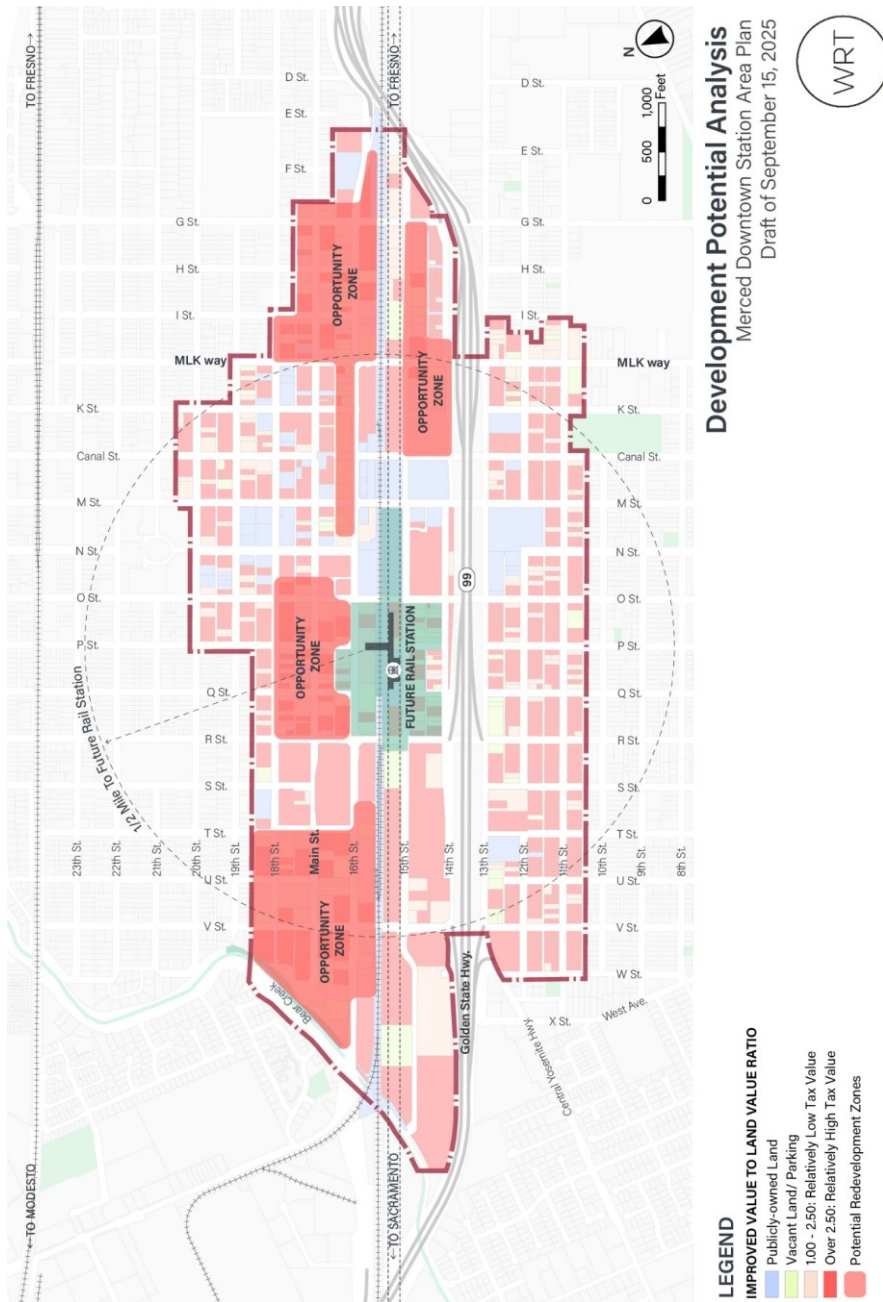


Figure 21: Generalized Development Opportunity Areas

Key Takeaways

The following factors are particularly relevant to long-range planning in the Plan Area include the following.

Established Policies and Regulations

Established policies emphasize:

- housing diversity and affordability;
- walkable access to local destinations and transit;
- pedestrian-friendly streets and street-oriented buildings;
- re-use of vacant and underutilized parcels; and
- a special a sense of community place.

Established policies also pertain to Downtown as a:

- preeminent commercial and cultural destination;
- center of finance, employment, government, and education;
- great residential neighborhood;
- place of opportunity for small businesses, entrepreneurs, and innovation;
- transit-oriented center for the city;
- economic center that capitalizes on future high speed rail service; and
- superior and distinct human-centered experience.

Zoning standards are not incompatible with urban infill development but by-right development is encumbered by relatively low building height limits and zoning standards that are not “objective.”

Existing Land Use

The Plan Area is comprised of characteristically different sub-areas in terms of their existing land use and development potential, as is generally described in **Figure 3: Land Use Sub-Areas**. These sub-areas include:

- the Downtown Core (with a rich mix of shops, restaurants, cultural destinations, and offices, and based on the extent of street-facing pedestrian-oriented building frontages);
- the future rail station site (based on a 2024 HSRA concept);
- an intervening “station area opportunity area” (partly comprised of surface parking and underutilized parcels);
- parts of the Courthouse Square Neighborhood (with a mix of small offices, residential, and government uses);
- sub-areas that are principally auto-oriented commercial areas east and west of the Downtown Core (with some older industrial and residential uses);
- an auto sales area with existing car dealerships; and
- and the northern portion of South Merced (with predominantly residential uses except for commercial uses along the 13th Street freeway frontage road).

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Highway 99 and the existing railroad tracks are barriers to pedestrian movement and visual barriers, which separate the Plan Area into three separated sub-areas: north of the railroad, between the railroad and freeway, and south of the freeway.

The land use potential the planning area is expected to change when high speed rail service shortens the time for business trips, recreational trips, commuter trips, and other trips to the Bay Area and LA regions. (See summary of existing conditions for market and economic development factors.)

Historic Character

The Plan Area has a strong historic identity because of architecture and tree-lined streets Downtown and the Courthouse Square Neighborhood. Many noteworthy buildings have yet to be evaluated to determine their historic merit and potential for historic designation.

Parks and Open Space

Most of the Plan Area has proximity to parks and other recreational open space, if public access to school facilities is factored, but access to neighborhood parks is limited and many schools now have locked gates surrounded by fences after hours. The DSAP may explore ways to add parks in areas that may be underserved, and how to enhance access to a trail along Bear Creek.

Development Potential

The future rail station with high speed rail service may promote new infill development. Underutilized land between the future station and Downtown is especially noteworthy in this regard. Aging and other underutilized commercial and industrial uses east and west of the Downtown Core present additional opportunities for infill development.