

Mercury News editorial: San Jose Urban Village rules needed

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Home prices are soaring, so the pressure again is on to build housing on any available land in San Jose. It's a sign of a strong economy. But in a city struggling to increase its tax base to better serve neighborhoods -- and to better pay police officers -- it's important to preserve land for commercial and industrial development, the backbone of healthy budgets in cities like Palo Alto and Sunnyvale. They have more jobs than employed residents, the opposite of San Jose.

Mayor Chuck Reed is worried that plans for urban villages, which are the basis of the city's new 2040 general plan, will become a way to sidestep the priority of preserving land for job growth. He has proposed delaying approval of a set of Five Wounds Area village plans that were on Tuesday's agenda until after a Nov. 12 council meeting on urban village rules. And he wants the council to approve policies making it clear that urban villages are not a mechanism to convert so-called employment lands to housing, nor to rush high-density housing into areas where job growth may be years away.

While often divided, the council is likely to agree on this. Adding jobs is the surest way to improve city revenue, and if employment land is vulnerable in the many urban villages proposed throughout the city in the 2040 plan, the goal of financial stability will not be met.

Delaying a vote on the Five Wounds plans until after the Nov. 12 session makes sense. Besides the jobs question, housing advocates have suggested the plans should include a statement on affordable housing, which neighbors just assumed would be built. Any tweaks should be easy. Generally, these are very good plans.

The area takes its name from the landmark Catholic church on East Santa Clara Street. A BART station is planned there, and the wider area would be made up of several village hubs. Plans were developed by residents -- really -- working with city planners and drawing on university resources through CommUniverCity, a wonderful collaboration of San Jose State University and its surrounding neighborhoods on a whole range of community challenges.

The village concept in the general plan is a way to accommodate population growth without building on the hillsides or, prematurely, in the Coyote Valley or Almaden Valley urban reserves. The idea is to place condos and apartments over stores, design streets that encourage walking to parks and shopping, and locate employment opportunities nearby. Not everyone who lives in a village will work there, but mixing jobs with housing creates a more efficient two-way commute. It is the most cost-effective way for the city to grow.

Increasing employment has to be the top priority for San Jose, however. If it's not, old and new neighborhoods of both high and low density will have less than adequate police patrols, library hours and other essential services the city struggles with today.