

Chapter 1: Introduction



Project Overview and Objectives

This report summarizes the results of an intensive community-based planning process in Firebaugh called a charrette. A charrette is a series of public involvement events that spans several days or more and culminates in a vision or design. The Firebaugh charrette was conducted July 13 – 17, 2006. Its purpose was to identify improvements to Highway 33, the downtown area, and other key street and pedestrian connections. These changes are intended to help revitalize the community by making it a more safe and appealing place to walk, shop, gather and do business.

The study area that is the focus of this report includes downtown Firebaugh, bounded by Highway 33/N Street to the southwest, 13th Street to the southeast, Q Street to the northeast, and Paso Canal to the northwest. It also spans the approximately 1.6 mile section of the Highway 33 corridor between Clyde Fannon and Helm Canal roads, and selected areas observed as key opportunities for creating linkages between neighborhoods north and south of downtown, parks, the San Joaquin River and schools.

Above: Aerial photograph of the project area.

This project was made possible through a Caltrans Environmental Justice: Context Sensitive Planning Grant received by the City of Firebaugh in partnership with the Local Government Commission (LGC). The LGC is a Sacramento-based nonprofit organization that works with communities, agencies and elected leaders to create healthy, walkable, and resource-efficient communities. The LGC assembled a skilled consultant team to conduct charrette activities and prepare the recommendations and designs presented in this report. Team members included walkable communities and public planning facilitation expert Dan Burden of Glatting Jackson (Orlando, Fl.), building and urban design firm Opticos Design, Inc. (Berkeley, CA), and students of U.C. Berkeley's Master of Urban Design Graduate Studies Program.

Community Engagement

In coordination with the City, the Local Government Commission organized a public design charrette process to address these challenges. This included a multi-day series of meetings, presentations and workshops that engaged residents, businesses, community organizations and local government in a variety of activities designed to elicit their concerns and suggestions, provide information about possible solutions, and foster collaborative development of a community vision. Walkability and community visioning expert Dan Burden of Glatting Jackson facilitated the meetings and charrette. Opticos Design provided design direction and prepared plan drawings with the support of UC Berkeley urban design graduate students.

Two community meetings were conducted on March 20th and May 10th, 2006 in advance of the charrette. At the first meeting a possibilities presentation on the features that help create desirable communities was given to a group of stakeholders, followed by an overview of the charrette process to the City Council. In March and April students in the UC Berkeley Urban Design Program, with the oversight of Stefan Pellegrini of Opticos Design, conducted analysis and investigations into urban design improvements in Firebaugh. Their final work was presented at the May 10th meeting, when they used drawings illustrating land use and design approaches to generate ideas for further exploration at the charrette. These drawings and a list of comments from participants are included in the appendix.

The charrette took place Thursday, July 13 through Monday, July 17, 2006 at Firebaugh Middle School. All events were conducted in English and Spanish. Focus group meetings of school officials, emergency responders, community service organizations, businesses, economic development agencies and Caltrans representatives were held Thursday, Friday and Monday during the day to hear input from a variety of specific interests. The public events kicked off with a Thursday night opening town meeting, and continued with a community training and interactive design tables on Friday evening. A "walking audit" was conducted Saturday morning. The consultant team continued to develop recommendations and drawings throughout the period based on public input, field checks and review of planning policies and information. The preliminary plan was presented at a closing meeting on Monday night.



Above, from top to bottom: Image from July 13th, 2006 focus group meeting; Community members discussing design alternatives at Friday evening session; Community members on Saturday morning's "walking audit" assessing potential areas for improvement.



On Thursday evening participants viewed a presentation that showed existing conditions and some potential solutions used in other communities. Dan Burden, facilitator of the presentation, explained the principles involved in creating walkable, livable places using images and photographs. Residents then participated in activities to determine their priorities for the charrette. Top priorities by votes included:

- Reconfigure streets, with narrower lanes, planted medians — 13
- Improved entry into Firebaugh — 11
- Truck parking — 11
- Shady streets — 10
- Connections to river and water — 9
- Farmer's market — 8
- Plaza (like in Mexico) as a central place — 8
- Friendly and attractive grocery store — 7
- Color and texture, unifying theme — 7
- Senior living — 7
- Clean and attractive streets and storefronts — 7



Above, clockwise from top left: Dan Burden leads Thursday evening presentation; Community members work to prioritize potential improvements; Community members discuss process and alternatives with meeting facilitators.



On Friday evening approximately 30 people gathered around maps to develop ideas to revitalize Firebaugh. General recommendations are summarized in the image above. Additional comments included:

Above: A summary of participant recommendations from the Friday evening public workshop.

- Improve truck parking
- Public restrooms in downtown and parks
- Covered sidewalks, benches, tree-lined streets in downtown
- Water fountains
- Improve baseball diamond
- Trail from high school to Maldonado Park
- Safe, wide, lighted sidewalks
- Use historical background as theme
- Eclectic mix of buildings
- Roundabouts to handle large farm equipment
- Move trailer park to quiet area

On Monday evening the design concepts prepared by the consultant team based on community input were presented at a final public meeting of over 60 people. Participants added closing comments, which included:

- Sidewalk settling and breaking: why?
- 13th and P: need safe street crossing for children
- Need public restrooms downtown
- Explore creation of a visitors center/museum
- Need development policy considering the walkability of proposed projects
- Clean up the river: plant trees on both sides.
- Address truck parking on both ends of town
- Widen river to create lake?
- Explore development of a campground in town

In the weeks following the workshop, Opticos Design and the Local Government Commission worked together to organize and prioritize the different design concepts that emerged from the meetings and workshops. The results, presented on the pages that follow, include information on the City's physical, economical, and social background, a summary of the research and analysis completed as part of the study, and conceptual urban design guidelines which seek to guide future revitalization activities throughout central Firebaugh.



Above, from top to bottom: Design team discusses results of Friday evening community breakout session; The Monday evening public presentation; Dan Burden speaks during the Monday evening presentation.