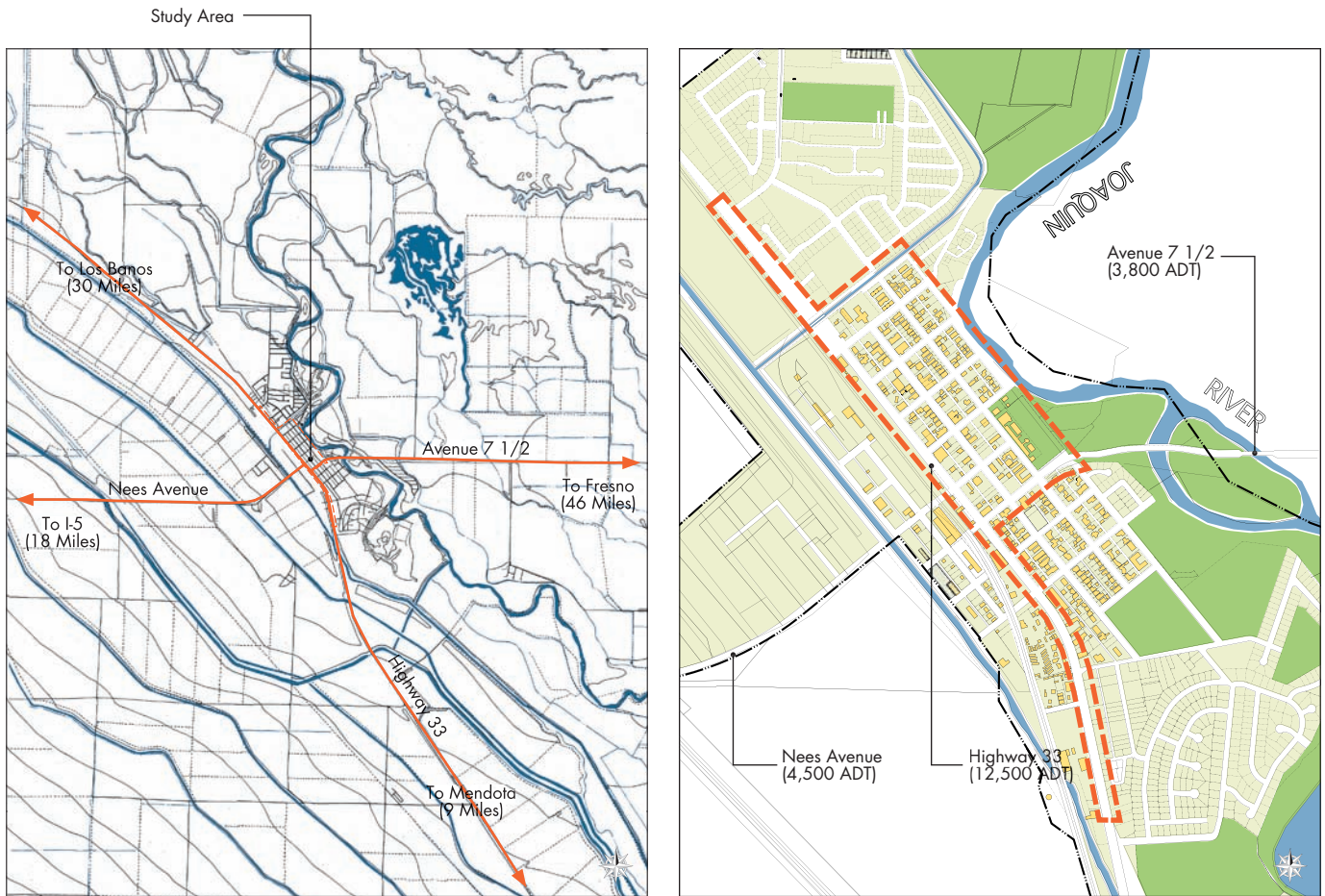


Chapter 2: Analysis and Background



Project Area and The Community

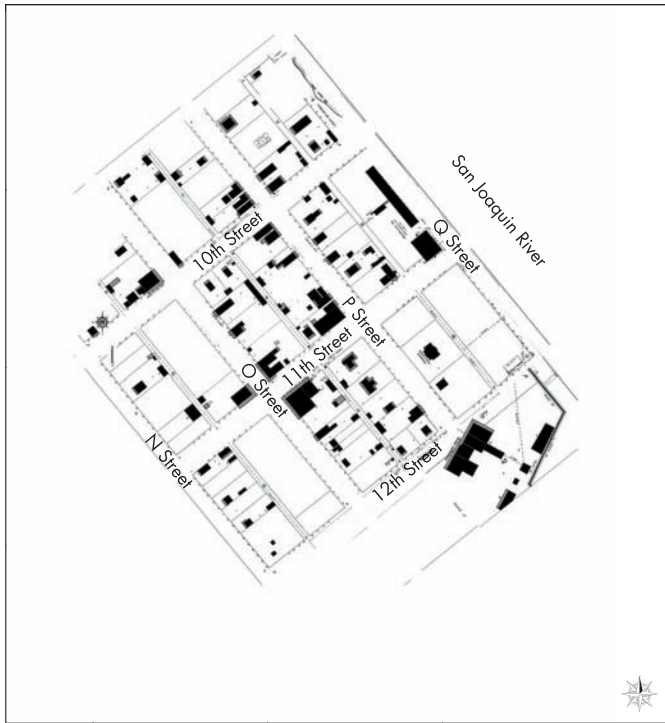
Firebaugh is a 90-year old rural city located in Fresno County, 42 miles northwest of the City of Fresno along the San Joaquin River. The city is surrounded by agricultural land and is bordered by the San Joaquin River to the northeast. State Highway Route 33 is at the southwestern edge of town, with development predominantly located between the highway and the river.

Highway 33, Nees Avenue and Avenue 7-1/2 provide regional access to the city. Highway 33 is a north-south regional route that becomes N Street and carries about 12,000 vehicles daily inside city limits (Caltrans). Nees Avenue connects Firebaugh to Interstate 5, located about 15 miles to the west, becomes 12th Street inside the city and carries approximately 4,500 vehicles daily (County of Fresno Council of Governments). Avenue 7-1/2 enters town from the east and becomes 13th Street, carries approximately 3,800 vehicles daily (Madera County), and links to roads to both Madera and Fresno to the east.

As of January 2005, Firebaugh was home to 6,741 people (California Department of Finance). Between 1990 and 2000 the City's population grew by almost 30% while population in the County as a whole grew by 19.8% percent. In 2000, 43% of all residents were under 19 years of age, 88% were Latino, 10% White, 1% Black and the remaining Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American or Other. English was the primary language spoken in fewer than 25% of all households (US Census).

Above Left: Firebaugh's location at the intersection of State Highway 33 and Nees Avenue/ Avenue 7 1/2, south of Los Banos, east of Interstate 5, and west of Fresno. The community is located along a particularly picturesque section of the San Joaquin River.

Above Right: Central Firebaugh's principal access routes with corresponding traffic levels.



Historical Background

The City of Firebaugh was established in 1854 when Andrew Firebaugh commenced a ferry service across the San Joaquin River, east of 12th and Q Streets. The ferry service flourished as a primary crossing for early Californians traveling between the Pacific coast and the Sierra. Despite the ferry’s eventual demise, it did much to define the basic character of the City, much of which is still visible today.

The City incorporated in 1914. The Sanborn Company produced Fire Insurance maps in 1914 and 1929 which provide insight into Firebaugh’s early years.

In 1914 the City was contained within a 9-block area bordered by 10th Street to the North, 12th Street to the South, N Street (today Highway 33) to the West, and Q Street to the East along the San Joaquin. Blocks were laid out in a uniform grid that measured 400’ long by 320’ wide and included a north-south alley measuring 20’ in width.

O and P Streets were already the location for several businesses, including many hotels and bars. A large hotel (the “Firebaugh Hotel”) was located along 12th Street at the end of P Street, in a location that would have been very convenient for travelers to and from the ferry.

By 1929 the City had expanded a full block to the north (to 9th Street) and south (to 13th Street) but continued to be defined between N and Q streets to the east and west. At this time Miller Lux had become a primary landowner within the town, reflecting their large agricultural holdings in the San Joaquin valley at the time.

Above left: Firebaugh in 1914. Originally laid out to serve Andrew Firebaugh’s ferry service, the town at its core has a form that is compact, pedestrian-oriented, and walkable.

Above right: Firebaugh in 1929. Well after the ferry service had been discontinued, the City continued to thrive as a service center for the surrounding agricultural industries.

Primary Challenges

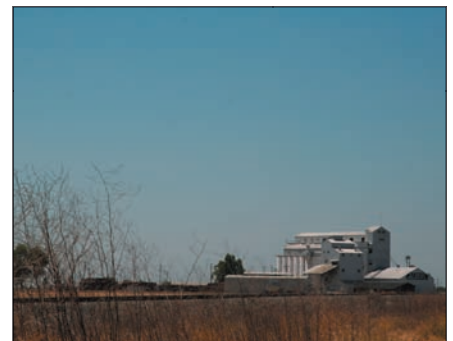
The community has suffered economic hardship associated with recent agricultural land retirement, the continued fallowing of lands in the area, and closing of agriculture-related employers. In 2000 almost 23% of residents lived below the poverty line. The unemployment rate was 20.63%, almost twice the County rate and nearly triple the State rate. The per capita average annual income was \$9,290, nearly 40% lower than the County average. The majority of residents qualified for low-income housing (US Census).

Over the past two decades the city has experienced economic disinvestment resulting in vacant lots, empty storefronts and declining properties. Many streetscapes are in disrepair and lack complete sidewalks, landscaping, lighting and safe crossings for the town's large youth (43%) population and disabled (16.8%) population, and others who cannot drive or do not have access to cars.

Residents must travel more than 30 miles to Fresno, Madera and other urban centers to meet much of their shopping needs. Between 1996-1997, Firebaugh experienced a leakage of \$1,656,445 in store spending (Applied Development Economics, 1997). A new study is currently underway and is likely to show that this number has increased in recent years, suggesting there is latent potential for business attraction and expansion. If efforts to revitalize downtown come to fruition it is expected that greater market opportunities for retail goods and services will surface. Firebaugh merchants will then be in a better position to effectively compete for local sales and create new jobs.

Another challenge facing the community is the lack of a visible town center. Central Firebaugh and other potential focal points, such as the San Joaquin River, lack definition and visibility from regional travel routes, including Highway 33, which runs parallel to the downtown one block to the west and carries the most traffic in the city. The lack of visual and physical connections to a core commercial area and other community assets have weakened community identity and contributed to lost economic opportunities. Passers-by overlook local shops and services and are unaware of community amenities, and investors and property owners are disinclined to place their dollars in new businesses, property improvements or new development.

There are numerous vacant and underutilized parcels in the downtown area that present opportunities for infill development that could include a mix of housing, office, and retail. Mixed-use infill projects could help the community capture more local sales and cultivate small business development, while simultaneously developing downtown's sense of place. Added housing can increase regular patronage to support vendors and provide affordable housing for a diversity of income and age groups.



Above, from top to bottom: Vacant lots and abandoned properties along O Street in central Firebaugh; Declining infrastructure along O Street; Large agricultural processing facilities around Firebaugh have recently declined as agricultural land has been retired.