

# A paved-over plan?: In North Natomas, visions of a community neighborhood got lost in a car-oriented suburb

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Mary Lynne Vellinga, The Sacramento Bee, Calif.  
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Oct. 30--Before the home construction crews and bulldozers descended on the flat plain of North Natomas, city leaders made their vision clear: The northern frontier of Sacramento would be a pedestrian-friendly place where people could work, play and shop in the same neighborhood.

Not only that, this city within a city would pay for itself. The houses, stores and offices would generate enough fees and taxes to build roads and community facilities as well as pay for public safety and other city services.

Eight years and 15,000 homes later, city leaders say the reality has fallen well short of that vision. North Natomas doesn't look or feel much different from nearby suburbs. In some respects, it's more car-oriented than most because its roads are oversized to handle traffic from Arco Arena.

"It still is a suburban community, and I think what we envisioned was something that would be more than a suburban community," Councilman Steve Cohn said at a recent council workshop on growth.

Land once envisioned for job centers has been rezoned for big box stores, served by broad, traffic-clogged roads. More rezoning proposals are in the works. A promised light-rail line may be decades away, and bus service is sparse. Sound walls separate neighborhoods from sidewalks and streets.

On a recent Saturday, Mayor Heather Fargo gave a driving tour to illustrate North Natomas' flaws. "Look at this poor guy trying to cross the street," she exclaimed as her car approached the offramp from Interstate 80 on Truxel Road, en route to shopping centers on the other side.

In the Natomas Marketplace and Natomas Promenade shopping centers, she said, "You can't even go from one major store to another without driving."

City amenities undelivered

Much to the irritation of some new Natomas residents, the city also has not

delivered promised improvements such as a police station, a second fire station, community centers and traffic lights at key intersections. The regional park remains an open field, and the finance plan for North Natomas doesn't contain the money to pay for it.

Schools are another sore point. Each of North Natomas' 14 "villages" was supposed to be anchored by an elementary school. But in three separate neighborhoods -- Natomas Central, Westlake and Natomas Meadows -- the school district has abandoned plans to build.

North Natomas' flaws have come to the forefront in recent weeks as Sacramento moves ahead on proposals to annex thousands of acres of farmland north of the city limits.

Fargo said the unfinished business in North Natomas should give the city pause before it annexes more land. "Frankly, we're not finished with North Natomas," she said.

Councilman Ray Tretheway focuses on the positive. The community has lots of bike paths, he said, and three small shopping centers people can walk to. "I talk to a lot of average people," he said. "They love Natomas. They're going crazy over it."

Yet residents attending recent meetings haven't been cheery. They demand that the city deliver promised amenities before moving to new territory.

"They feel they were tricked and their leaders have failed them," said Westlake resident Tom Reavey, a Sacramento County Taxpayers League board member. "Natomas as built bears no relationship to the community plan. The community plan called for walkable communities with neighborhood schools.

"What we've ended up with is almost the polar opposite," he said. "We've got traffic-choked, wide-laned major streets with little to no public transportation options, little pedestrian access, and scant walkability or bikeability."

In September, when a 12-year-old Natomas Middle School student was fatally struck walking on the Del Paso Road bridge over Interstate 5, some blamed the city. Signals planned for the crossings at I-5's onramp and offramp haven't been installed. "It really just tore at us," said resident Ken Stevenson. "That's been a dangerous situation for years."

The finance plan for North Natomas lists traffic signals on Del Paso Road as one of the planned improvements. Dan Roth, Tretheway's district director, said the current schedule is to install them by 2009.

Earlier this year, acting on a request from the Natomas Community Association, the Sacramento County grand jury scrutinized North Natomas. Its

final report called for an audit comparing the results of the Natomas development with the goals the city originally set, as well as its spending on improvements.

The City Council rejected the recommendation, saying that the grand jury report was based on outdated information, and that city finances are routinely audited.

#### Lack of services defended

The city defended its performance on delivering services to North Natomas, citing several reasons planned improvements failed to materialize.

A major reason: Not everything was included in the developer-funded North Natomas finance plan. Some things, such as freeway interchanges and a regional park, were left out because they were deemed community-wide benefits. Only part of the cost of the police station was covered.

The city took other items off the table to reduce the fees developers would charge homebuyers. The second fire station and three of four planned community centers are in this category.

"We were cautious about overburdening the development with fees because we really wanted it to get started," said Planning Director Carol Shearly. "We didn't know how far we could push."

As it turned out, the city's concern was unwarranted. With the housing market boiling, what was supposed to be a 25-year plan was half-built within six years. Sales have since declined along with the housing market.

Officials said rising construction costs also hampered the city's ability to deliver improvements, and government aid didn't materialize as planned.

"We haven't seen the federal and state monies we anticipated in this plan," said Mark Griffin, the city's fiscal manager.

#### Unrealistic expectations?

Fargo, who represented North Natomas before she was elected mayor, said she thinks new residents hold unrealistic expectations for how quickly the city can deliver services and improvements, and what level of service they should receive.

A South Natomas resident, Fargo noted that she had to wait 20 years for her own community center.

She cited the public safety issue, a major preoccupation of North Natomas residents. While she frequently hears complaints about a lack of police services, Fargo said the area has much less violent crime than many other city

neighborhoods.

That doesn't mean she thinks North Natomas is a success, however. Fargo has plenty of criticisms about the design of the community whose development she helped oversee. In some cases, she can recite chapter and verse what happened; in others, she's not really sure.

Natomas Marketplace -- a congested shopping center on Truxel Road -- was rezoned despite her no vote. Wide streets were imposed on the neighborhood by city traffic engineers.

But why does the future regional park have a sound wall along part of its length, with houses turned away and no parking on the street?

"This one embarrasses me, because I feel like I ought to have caught it," she said. "But when you're the only council person looking at the plans, and they're coming so fast ... ."

Fargo has urged that any future development to the north be phased, so the city can oversee it more carefully.

"I'm not interested in doing North Natomas north," Fargo told her colleagues at a recent meeting. "If it can't be on the cover of a national magazine as a model, I don't know why we'd want to do more."