



South County's Path Of Change

With a third of the county's future housing and upscale retail arriving, the balance of development has tipped irreversibly

When most folks think about the Deep South, they think of hush puppies and chitlins. But around here, the deep south has a different meaning — the great suburban reaches of Otay Mesa. Going up in the GoogleEarth helicopter, the deep south has yet another visual picture: that of the imaginary line that separates Us from Them. There is the 1.5 million-plus folks living in Tijuana and Us means the people living in a sparsely populated sector of San Diego County known as Otay Mesa.

The Us territory is rapidly changing. Next year when State Route 125 (the South Bay Expressway) opens for business, the world of

Otay Mesa will change dramatically and irreversibly.

The city of San Diego, with the assistance of Mark Steele and his associates, is currently working its way through a remarkably complicated document that will evolve into the Otay Mesa community plan — all 9,300 acres of it. Because the city is broke, the plan is being paid for by seven landowners. It's a multiyear process that will set the pace for development of the city's portion of the mesa.

The portion with the county of San Diego's planning jurisdiction (east of the expressway) will be mostly industrial, R&D or office.

The county's portion will evolve as State

Route 11 is extended from the expressway to meet up with the planned Mexican thoroughfare. Some believe the Mexican side is moving ahead with its highway plans faster than the U.S. side.

The city side of the mesa will be built out with a combination of residential and commercial properties stretching from Interstate 805 to the expressway and south to the border. In keeping with smart growth, the residential densities will be higher than normal suburban housing with a fair share of apartment/condominium/townhome zoning. We applaud this high-density zoning as the costs to the city per unit are far less than with the old model.

Otay Mesa has a near monopoly on developable industrial land in the county and it remains relatively affordable. Improved land can still be acquired for under \$12 per square foot compared to more than double that in the
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northern reaches.

The South Bay Expressway also means that eastern Chula Vista will blossom as never before. You may have noticed the multitude of stories on the new Otay Ranch Town Center with its 90 stores (first phase), movie theater and elegant design. It mimics the remarkably successful City Place in Palm Beach, Fla. It is like a new downtown and unlike the traditional pheasant under glass approach of most regional centers.

Hopefully, the center's second phase will include a Nordstrom. After all, the average household in eastern Chula Vista has an income approaching \$100,000. Who would have thunk it? And a Nordstrom would allow Chula Vista to intercept the cash-heavy upper-middle class Mexican population before its multitudes reach Fashion Valley.

The city of Chula Vista is working diligently to develop a multicollage campus on the 900 acres deeded to it by the owners of Otay Ranch. It won't happen tomorrow, but sometime in the next decade. Just in time, too.

The population of eastern Chula Vista and Otay Mesa will account for more than a third of all new growth in the county in the next quarter century. Actually,

it may be more than a third if urban development in the rest of the county doesn't take off. To date, Gail Goldberg's smart growth villages plan for the city of San Diego lies moribund awaiting gutsy politicians and a revived housing market.

Another landmark — the Eastlake Design District — is worthy of mention. Mike and Kellie Vogt have opened the first phase of their 450,000-square-foot home to a wide range of furniture and home furnishings retailers. Now South County residents won't have to go up to Miramar Road to satisfy their cravings for nice innards for their homes. And soon they will have two high-quality eateries for weary shoppers.

Anchoring the western end of Chula Vista will be the much ballyhooed Gaylord project with its 1,500-plus hotel rooms and 400,000 square feet of convention space. It will be a destination resort of the first order. The Gaylord will act as its own mini ConVis, just as it does at its Nashville and Orlando locations. Now if it can only manufacture a beach.

Overall, south San Diego County is poised to be an economic powerhouse. I used to tell folks that the area south of State Route 94 was not in the Thomas Guide because nobody would look at

those pages. It's a different story now. You can even Google Otay Mesa. What a wonderful world.

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