Visalia’s Proactive Approach To Today’s Housing Challenges: The City of Visalia is moving ahead to address current crises in the housing market — foreclosures, run-down neighborhoods and affordable housing— by getting into the real estate and renovation business.

They are using $2.3 million dollars of federal grant money to refurbish dozens of foreclosed properties, and then re-sell them. According to Visalia Housing Director Ricardo Noguera, "What we are attempting to do here is stabilize the neighborhoods."

Prospective homebuyers of these refurbished homes will be under income restrictions but the houses will be affordable. "Whatever we put in in improvements combined with the purchase price is what we will sell it for," said Noguera.

Best Bets for New Development: Urban-style development may be the brightest spot in a gloomy market. A recent survey of developers and investors by the Urban Land Institute for its annual Emerging Trends in Real Estate Report found that urban redevelopment had the best prospects among all types of housing, while urban mixed-use properties and town centers scored high among niche property types.

Developer Notes Buyers Are Going Back To Basics: According to Chico-based developer John Anderson, "One way or another, work and food are going to be with us in good times and bad. Flexibility and peace of mind are the new must-have amenities, with a lot of folks preferring these over granite counter tops and whoopie tubs."

Federal and State Governments Set Out to Knock Down the Silos: Earlier this year, HUD and DOT announced an unprecedented partnership to work together to implement joint housing and transportation initiatives. Now EPA has joined them, to ensure that housing and transportation goals are met while simultaneously protecting the environment, promoting equitable development and helping to address the challenges of climate change.

The trio have announced that they will target federal funding toward existing communities to improve sustainability through such strategies as transit-oriented, mixed-use development and land recycling.

At the same time, these agencies intend to align federal policies and funding to remove barriers to collaboration, leverage funding and increase the accountability and effectiveness of all levels of government to plan for future growth, including making smart energy choices such as locally generated renewable energy.

A similar undertaking began earlier this year at the State level, with the first meeting of California’s Strategic Growth Council, established by law last year. A partnership between the Secretaries of the Resources Agency, the Office of Planning and Research, the Health and Human Services Department, the Business and Transportation Agency, and CalEPA plans to work together to assist state and local entities in the planning of sustainable communities and meeting AB 32 goals.

One of the first things on the agenda of the Strategic Growth Council is determining how to spend Prop. 84 funding. The LGC is working with them on a proposal to assist local planning activities through a revolving loan fund.

New Resources for Sustainable Communities: Design for Diversity: Exploring Socially Mixed Neighborhoods by University of Georgia Professor Emily Talen offers detailed studies of socially diverse neighborhoods and evidence that such neighborhoods are better off than more homogenous neighborhoods. She notes that the most successful urban communities are very often those that are the most diverse — in terms of income, age, family structure, and ethnicity — and yet poor urban design and planning can stifle the very diversity that makes communities successful. This book is available from the American Planning Association at: http://myapa.planning.org/APAStore/Search/Default.aspx?p=3905.

The California Air Pollution Control Officers Association has just issued a new document, Model Policies for GHG in General Plans. The downloadable document provides background information, examples, references, links, and a systematic workshop to help local governments move toward GHG considerations in General Plan updates or in the development of specific Climate Action Plans. To view or download a copy, go to www.CAPCOA.org.

The Attorney General has information on a new web page that helps cities and counties address greenhouse gas emissions in CEQA documents. In the form of answers to commonly asked questions, resources, and funding information, it may be found at http://ag.ca.gov/globalwarming/ceqa/generaplans.php.
The concept proposes that people rent or buy eco-friendly, garage-free homes in the densely built community with interconnected pathways. Residents would receive transit passes with the cost of their home but could pay separately for one of just 100 parking spaces. A village square would feature a grocery store and other services. Shuttles would ferry passengers to the campus of Cal State Hayward and BART.

On May 28, the Hayward Planning Commission approved new zoning that allows for a higher level of housing per acre at the 30-acre quarry than what is permitted in the rest of the city. The zoning also dramatically reduces the amount of parking required. New residential development in California commonly requires two parking spaces per housing unit. Under the new Hayward zoning, there is no minimum number of spaces, only maximums — 1.3 spaces per studio or one-bedroom unit. Currently, land for Quarry Village is owned by Caltrans, which, after scrapping plans for a freeway extension, wants to unload the property.

Other Bay Area cities already have crafted land-use policies to push development and renovations in a more environmentally conscious direction. San Francisco is partnering with developers on two huge redevelopment projects, one at Treasure Island and another that comprises both Candlestick Park and the Hunters Point Shipyard. Together they could add 36,000 residents to the city in the next 20 years.

Neither project includes single-family housing, and each is designed with energy conservation in mind. Plans include allowing buyers to purchase parking separately from their homes and requiring them to buy transit passes. The total number of residential parking spaces in each plan is cut back from most new development, but not nearly as much as at Quarry Village.

Michael Cohen, who manages the city’s development projects, said he believes the San Francisco projects are innovative as well as realistic.

“We believe that what we are trying to do is at the very edge of environmental sustainability while still being financially feasible,” Cohen said.

**Quote of the Month:** "We have an economy that tells us that it is cheaper to destroy earth in real time than to renew, restore, and sustain it. You can print money to bail out a bank but you can’t print life to bail out a planet."

— Economist Paul Hawkin, author and business man