

From The Atlantic

CITYLAB

Before California's Drought, a Century of Disparity

In the San Joaquin Valley, a legacy of shortsighted land-use planning has intensified the water crisis for poor residents.

LAURA BLISS | [@mslaurabliss](#) | Oct 1, 2015 | 15 Comments



A farmworker fills a water tank in East Porterville, California. (REUTERS/Lucy Nicholson)

Editor's Note: This story is part one of a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities.

FRESNO, Calif.—Bulmarío Tapia Madrigal doesn't want to shower in a stream of dirt. He doesn't want to cook with bottled water, haul a bucketful to flush the toilet, or wonder if he has enough water to clean the diabetes wounds on his feet. But since his well went dry three months ago, that's how life has been.

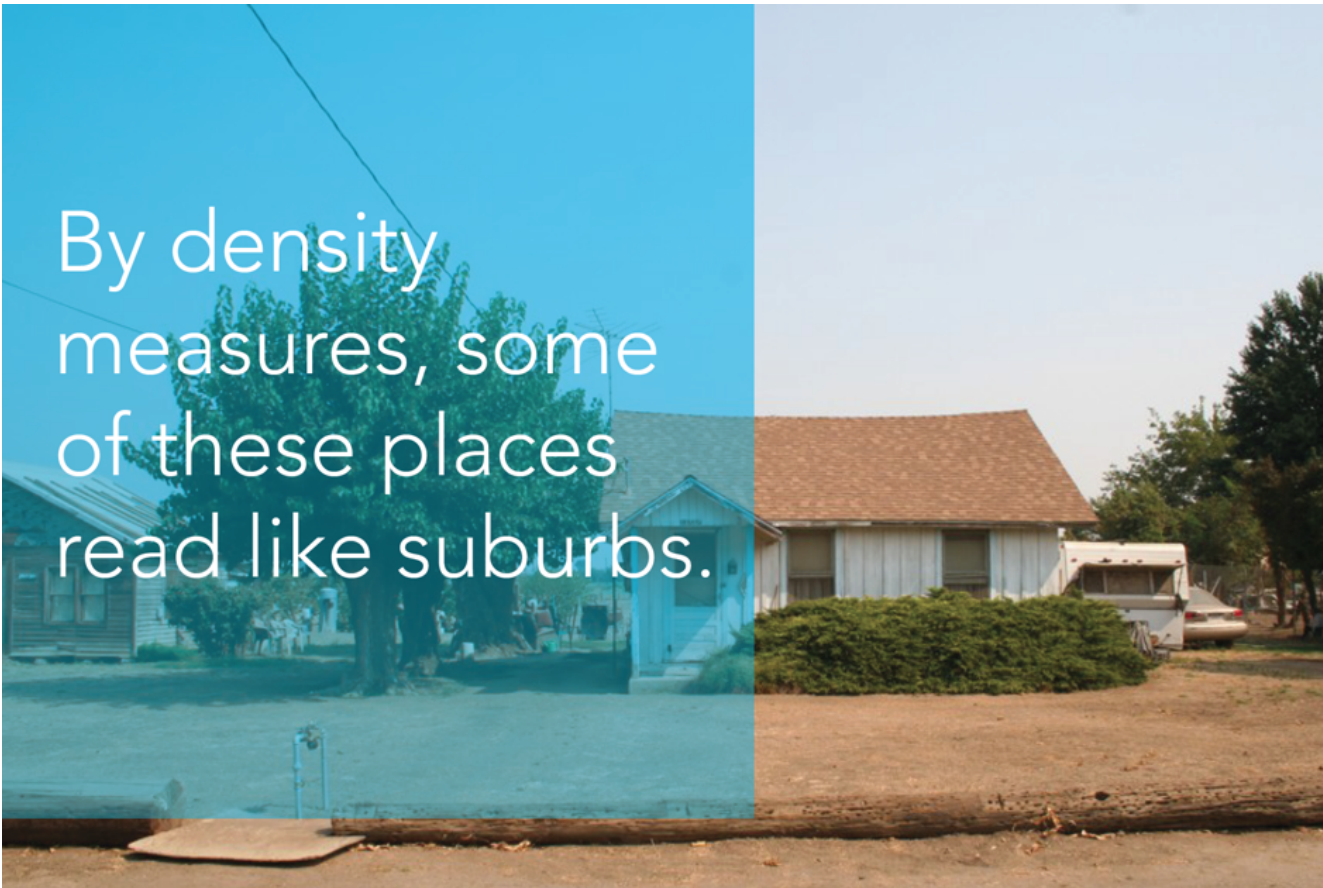
Some relief is coming for the 70-year-old orange picker. On a dry August afternoon, he zips his motorized wheelchair up and down his driveway, anxiously watching a crew of workers. They're nearly finished connecting his pipes to a new emergency water-storage tank in his front yard, so large it casts a shadow over Madrigal's red-trimmed bungalow.

"Over by the bakery, there's a lady who has lived like this for two years," Madrigal says in Spanish. He sweeps his arm toward the street, where the dusty front yards of neighbors are also occupied by hulking water tanks. "Anyone who used a well before no longer can."

This is not a developing nation. This is East Porterville, California, where more than 500 wells have dried up since the beginning of the state's worst-on-record drought four years ago. It's home to most of the [1,675 wells](#) (and counting) that are sucking dirt in Tulare County. Tulare is one of the eight inland counties that make up the San Joaquin Valley, the [richest agricultural region in the world](#).

Tulare County has been working with local nonprofits to provide and refill storage tanks for low-income families who've run out of well water. There are an estimated 1,750 households in East Porterville, and at least 35 percent of residents live in poverty. For people like Madrigal, the tanks are literally lifesavers.

But they're also a mark of disparity. If it weren't for those tanks, you might never know that where Madrigal lives is separate from the city of Porterville. Even though his address reads "Porterville," he lives on unincorporated county land adjacent to municipal limits. That means he is just beyond the reach of Porterville's formal water district, which has continued to serve its more than 16,000 customers with clean, running water without issue throughout the drought.

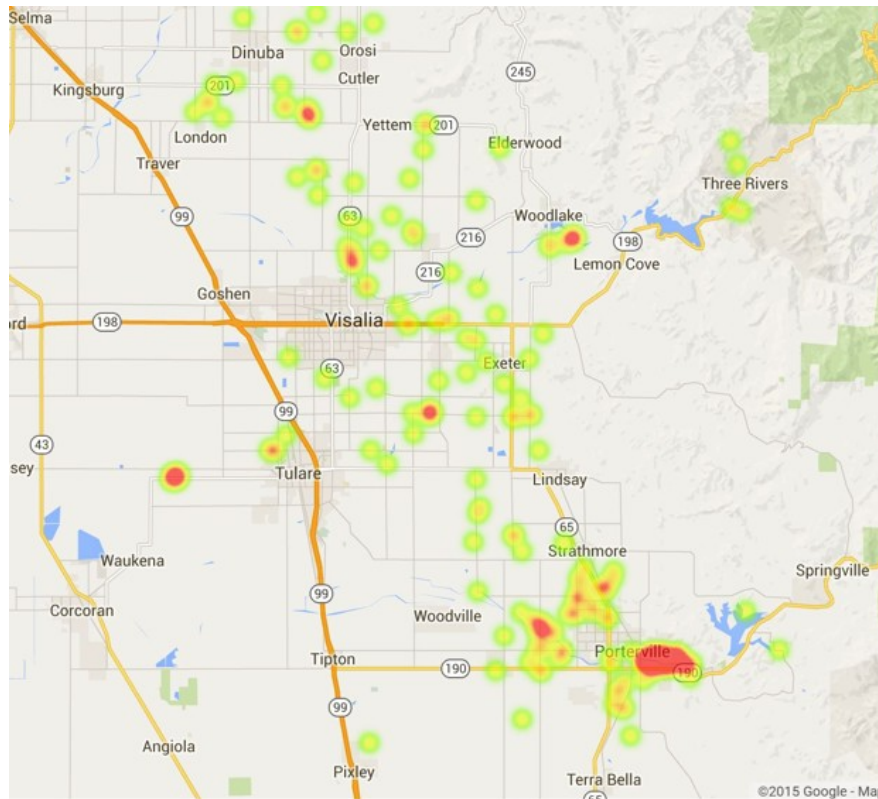


By density
measures, some
of these places
read like suburbs.

Dry wells are spreading beyond East Porterville. There is a pattern to the spread: [Poor, unincorporated, predominantly non-white communities are the ones struggling.](#) Caught between city and county, water issues are nothing new to these densely settled places. Many have dealt with a lack of appropriate water infrastructure—and contaminated supplies—for decades. The drought is only the newest, most visible layer in a strata of disparities.

“The land is half and half here,” Madrigal says. “Half dry, half alive.”

Madrigal and his neighbors have long relied on wells that pump water from the ground, the same reserves used by surrounding farms to keep crops lush. Since the beginning of the drought, farmers have drilled their wells deeper, sucking up more of the ground supply. With scarce rain, the aquifer hasn’t been recharged. Tulare County’s water table is shallow, relative to other parts of the San Joaquin Valley. So more and more wells are coming up empty.



A heat map of dry wells in Tulare County. (CSET).

It's tempting to call what's happening here a [slow-motion natural disaster](#). It is also tempting to point the finger at farmers, as so much [media coverage of the drought](#) has.

But those hit hardest by the drought have been vulnerable for decades. The San Joaquin Valley's history of Wild West land-use planning, its governance structures, and the political disenfranchisement of an entire class of citizens have created a human-made crisis.

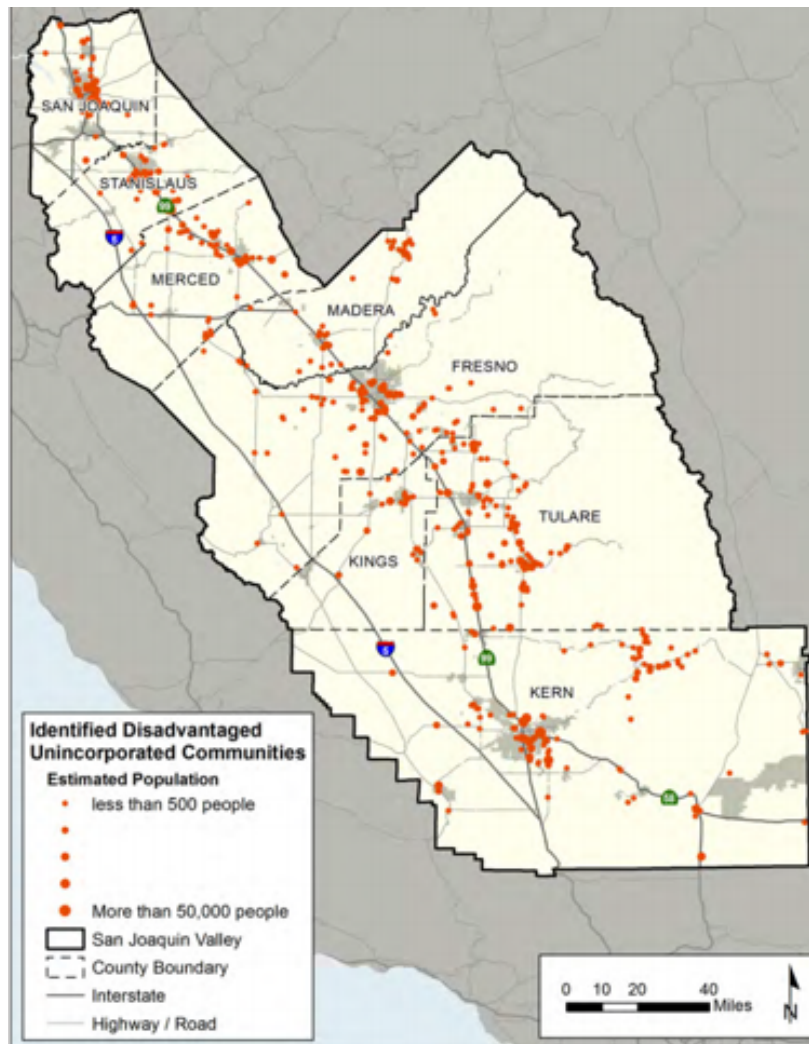
The sprawling, underserved San Joaquin Valley

[A recent report by the California nonprofit PolicyLink](#) counted 525 poor, densely populated, unincorporated communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley, inhabited by some 310,000 people. Some, like East Porterville, are on the fringes of larger towns. Others are islands within city limits. And still others are scattered to the hinterlands, far from anywhere else.

Sixty-five percent of the population in these places are people of color. Sixty-four percent are low-income.

Waves of black and Latino farmworkers settled many of these communities in

the first half of the 20th century, sometimes living in tents or shacks until they had the means to build their own homes. Until the 1960s, land use—an authority reserved for local governments in California—was almost totally deregulated in the region. Hundreds of subdivisions sprang up throughout the San Joaquin Valley, with little thought about the future impact of disconnected sprawl.



Source: PolicyLink analysis of 2000 U.S. census and county parcel and boundary data.

Disadvantaged unincorporated communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. (PolicyLink)

Many of these places probably looked good to poor farmworkers: inexpensive, close to the fields, with low taxes and little government oversight. Outside the city, you could keep the kinds of animals you wanted, and the kinds of vehicles. What land-use restrictions existed were barely enforced.

"There are lots of good reasons to build outside the city," says Eric Coyne, an official with the Tulare County Resource Management Agency. "At one point, a

shallow well might have been sufficient for a family.”

It’s true: For most of the past century in California, there has been rain to replenish groundwater supplies. And there used to be more surface water. East Porterville, for example, is just across from the once-overflowing Tule River.

Carrie Bonner was seeking field work and an affordable place to live when she came to the Fresno County subdivision of Lanare in 1948. At that time, it was mainly her family and other black families, settling in substandard farmworker housing until they’d saved enough to buy some land.

“You got to choose where you put your house,” the 91-year-old says. “There was no one saying, ‘Go here’ or ‘Go here.’ You dug your well. It was a community effort.”

Lanare sits right next to Riverdale, a wealthier community settled at around the same time by white dairy owners. Some [research suggests](#) that Riverdale real estate agents excluded people of color from settling there in the first half of the 20th century, or at least encouraged them to look elsewhere. Certainly, the poverty that these farm workers faced locked them out of pricier lots. Elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley, [racially restrictive covenants](#) did expressly keep people of color out of white communities.

Michelle Anderson, a Stanford University public law scholar who focuses on state and local governments, writes in the [UCLA Law Review](#) about the development of these subdivisions:

Neglect by white officials, often compounded by community need to keep housing costs low, resulted in a lack of rudimentary infrastructure, including paved streets, sewers, utilities, and water. These unplanned, unregulated communities retained a rural character—embodied by backyard husbandry and subsistence farming—that reflected the importance of self-sufficiency during times of employment insecurity.

Over the years, that government neglect was explicit in some cases. An ordinance in Tulare County's 1971 general plan (updated only within the last decade) is particularly grim, intentionally aiming investment away from 15 poor, unincorporated communities—assuming that they would eventually depopulate. The [plan reads](#):

Public commitments to communities with little or no authentic future should be carefully examined before final action is initiated. These non-viable communities would, as a consequence of withholding major public facilities such as sewer and water systems, enter a process of long term, natural decline as residents depart for improved opportunities in nearby communities.

Today, 13 of those “non-viable” communities are still around. They include Seville, which went into a water shortage emergency during the week in August that I visited the San Joaquin Valley. They also include East Oroquieta, Farmersville, Yettam, Monson, and Exeter—[all places where wells have dried up in the last year](#). Far from disappearing, some of these communities have even grown since the 1970s, surviving on the insufficient infrastructure that marked them for disinvestment. Many are now adjacent to cities that crept up toward them. By density measures, some read like suburbs. They are not temporary places, as Tulare County had hoped.

Clearly, steering funds away has not encouraged residents to “depart”: Property values are so low that it's hard for residents to move, even if they wanted to.

Which not everyone does. The characteristics that attracted residents to county subdivisions in the first place—their low cost, minimal government oversight, and spirit of self-sufficiency—still appeal. Many residents retain a good deal of pride in a place they've built with their own hands.

Yet for water (and other types of infrastructure), many of these poor, county subdivisions remain largely self-reliant—using either small, private wells, like

in East Porterville, or community water systems that source from a few larger, common wells. The recent drought is hardly the first time that access to drinking water from these wells has been compromised.

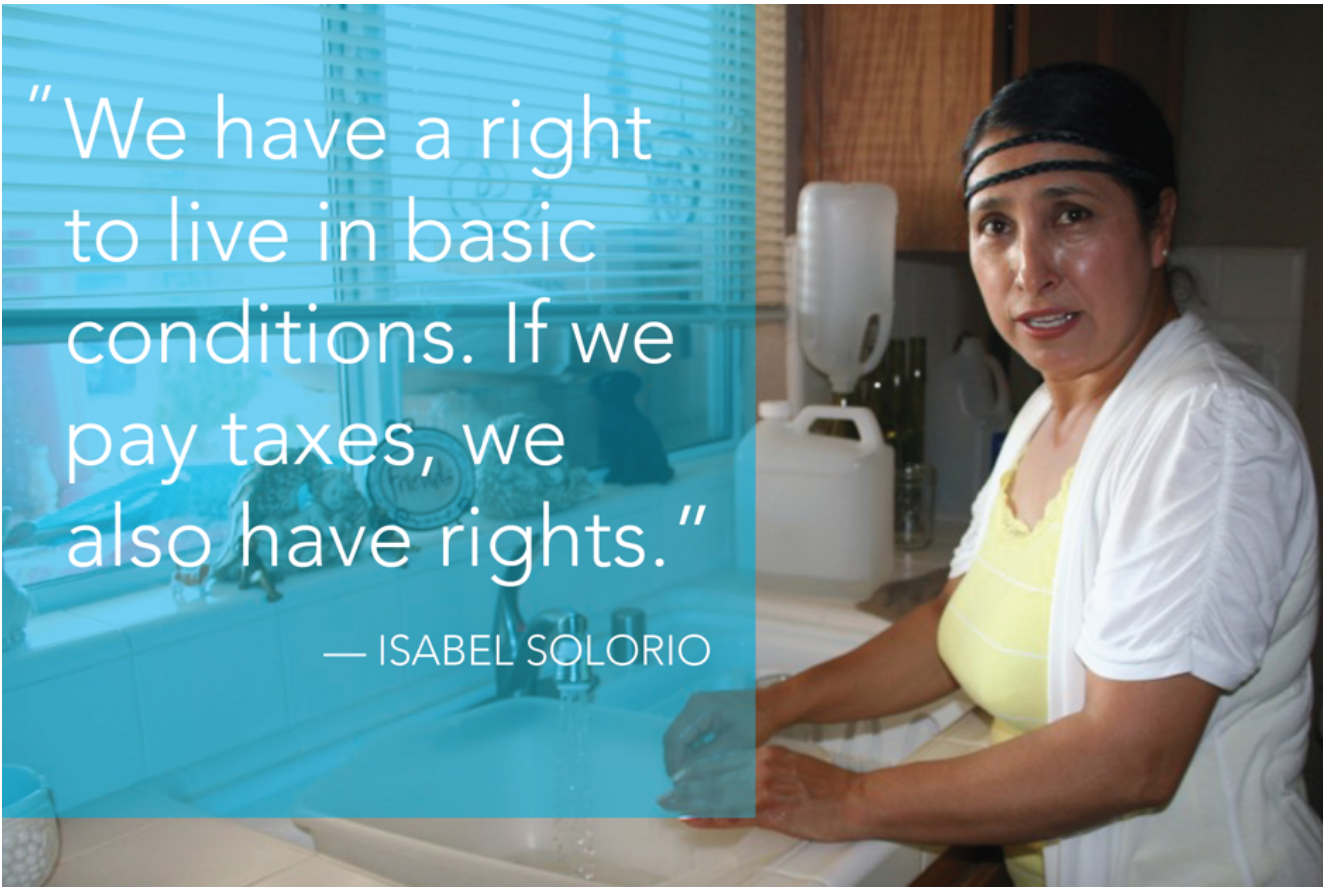
When water is available, it's not always safe to drink

Surrounded by farmland, many unincorporated communities have had fertilizers, pesticides, and livestock waste leaking into their groundwater for decades. [The San Joaquin Valley has the highest rates of drinking water contamination](#) in the state, and the largest number of public water systems found in violation of EPA limits for nitrates, arsenic, fecal coliform bacteria, and other contaminants. The health effects can be [severe](#).

Unincorporated places are particularly at risk for contamination, since their wells tend to be shallower. The drought is exacerbating this problem: With less water, concentrations of groundwater contaminants are spiking.

All of this, despite the fact that [California has legally declared that every citizen has a right to safe drinking water](#).

In Isabel Solorio's spartan kitchen in Lanare, the countertops are lined with plastic gallon jugs of water. Solorio stands at her sink, letting water run from the tap. "Sometimes it's slimy," the 50-year-old says, rubbing her fingers in the stream. She puts her fingertips to her nose, hesitantly. The water has a faint sulfuric mustiness.



"We have a right to live in basic conditions. If we pay taxes, we also have rights."

— ISABEL SOLORIO

In the nearly 28 years she's lived here, Solorio says she can't remember a time when the water was safe to drink. Levels of arsenic (which occurs naturally, unlike nitrates from runoff) in Lanare's water supply are well above the EPA limit. For her, the drought is just another piece of a world in disorder. "The atmosphere and the Earth are sick," she says in Spanish, looking out the kitchen window. There's a children's play structure in her yard and a sea of alfalfa fields beyond it. "And people are sick. All these dots connect."

In addition to cleaning houses for a living, Solorio has acted as Lanare's lead community activist, convening residents and legal advocates on a monthly basis to fight for safe drinking water and other basic services (Lanare also lacks a sewage system, street lights, and sidewalks).

In 2002, the community won a \$1.3 million federal grant to construct an arsenic treatment plant, which took five years to build. But the project was mismanaged, and after the plant opened, operational costs skyrocketed for the low-income community of 600. The plant ran for just six months before shutting down, and now sits disused in a chain-link cage next to Lanare's community center. The community's water system—which sources from two

common wells—then went into [state receivership](#).

The water that comes out of residents' taps is not safe to drink. Yet Solorio and her neighbors still pay \$54 a month for their water bills, largely to pay off debts incurred by the plant. Meanwhile, they rely on jugs of water delivered and paid for by the state.

Will the plant ever come back into commission? Phoebe Seaton, co-director of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, which provides legal and advocacy services to Lanare, darkly jokes that the best solution might be to turn it into a jungle gym.

The county won't budge

It's not clear how Lanare is going to move forward. In the absence of a formal town government, a special "community services district" is supposed to run Lanare's water system after its receivership ends. That "CSD" consists of volunteers, one of whom is Solorio's husband, who also works full-time as a contract welder on farms. Right now the CSD doesn't even have enough members to constitute a quorum.

Could the county intervene? Lanare residents say that officials had hardly even visited until last July, when Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes sat down for a meeting in the community center after repeated invitations. Residents aired their grievances, and Mendes listened. But when one resident asked what concrete steps he was going to take to resolve Lanare's problems, "he told them the best thing that could happen was that he had come there," Veronica Garibay, the Leadership Counsel's other co-director, recalls.

Mendes says he thought it was a productive meeting. "I told them to straighten out their affairs," he says. He feels Lanare is on its way to being solvent, and "fixing its culture so that everyone pays their water bills," a concept that had to be "pounded into people." Beyond that, Mendes says it's up to the community to figure out how to get their needs met.

County governments in the San Joaquin Valley aren't legally responsible for providing urban infrastructure, nor are they set up to do so. "We could have designed government schemes where counties are really tailored to rural

government, but by and large we didn't," says Anderson, the Stanford legal scholar. She points to 1964's ["One Man, One Vote"](#) U.S. Supreme Court decision ([currently being challenged](#)) as a critical reason that it's so difficult for rural areas to leverage county resources. When it comes to voting on how money is allocated, city voters outnumber rural voters heavily.

When asked how Fresno County might be able to help Lanare obtain safe drinking water, Bernard Jimenez, Fresno County's deputy director of planning, echoes Mendes' sentiment. "The county does not have the resources or the funding to provide services to all the unincorporated communities," he says. "That's just the way it works."



But compare the people who are supposed to run Lanare's water system to the fully trained, paid employees of a municipal water district.

Then add to that the challenge and cost of maintaining a safe water system—an inherently expensive endeavor, even more so for a poor community of 600 that lacks economy of scale—and it's incredible that the residents of Lanare have made it this far.

It's even more incredible that, as the drought drags on and water becomes all the more precious, there's been little meaningful government intervention.

"It is inspiring for people to go these distances without government support, in a country where so many forms of infrastructure are subsidized through taxes," says Anderson. "But there are limits to individual self-reliance. There are things people cannot build all by themselves."

City connections

Government neglect in the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities is certainly not limited to counties. As cities in the San Joaquin Valley grew and annexed more surrounding land, they often avoided the poorest communities as they did so. That's generally how "island" communities—unincorporated patches within city limits—formed.

For those communities, and for those like East Porterville on the fringes of larger cities, the question of why the city can't just extend some pipes can seem bewildering.

At the chain-link fence at the front of his property, Madrigal points to a clearing of pines just beyond the last house on his street. "Just right over there is the supply cut-off," he says. "I believe there's water for the town. It's just this area that's left off."

The workers in his yard finish their work. They flip the switch on the pump they've installed and water starts coursing through Madrigal's pipes for the first time in months. He tells me I can go inside to check the kitchen sink. I flip the handle up. Sure enough, water flows out, clean and pure. But Madrigal's supply is limited to what's in the tank. So I quickly turn off the tap.

The drought is dragging on. Water is only becoming more precious and more expensive. Questions of annexation and consolidated water services are fundamental to the debate around how these communities are to survive. State and local governments are beginning to ramp up efforts to invest in and connect unincorporated communities to larger, more reliable systems. But in a region plagued with a legacy of questionable planning decisions, there's plenty standing in the way.

"We all want to serve these people," says Coyne, the Tulare County official.
"The question is, how do we get those funds?"

An equally important question is: Where do they get the water?

Next week, I'll try to answer both.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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From The Atlantic

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Why California's Poorest Towns Still Can't Connect to Water

In the dried-out San Joaquin Valley, consolidating water systems brings out ugly politics.

LAURA BLISS | [@mslaurabliss](#) | Oct 8, 2015 | [10 Comments](#)



A man hauls boxes of bottled water into his home on the outskirts of Tulare, California. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Editor's note: This story is part two of a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities. Read part one [here](#).

FRESNO, Calif.—In Matheny Tract, California, the sour odor of sewage is especially strong in the morning—and so is the irony that residents can't connect to the system it represents.

The poor, unincorporated community of roughly 300 homes sits adjacent to the city of Tulare, population 61,000. A single, dusty field is all that separates Matheny Tract's mostly African-American and Latino residents from Tulare's recently expanded wastewater treatment plant. Though Tulare's sewer system is more robust than ever, Matheny Tract residents must use septic tanks, since they are not part of the city. For a dense settlement, this spells trouble.

"People can't always afford to pump out their tanks, so sometimes they overflow," says Vance McKinney, a 59-year-old truck driver and community leader. "I've watched children jump over ponds of sewage to get to school in the morning."

The leaching tanks are likely responsible for the fecal bacteria that's been found in the shallow community wells from which Matheny Tract gets its water. Nitrates, probably from fertilizer runoff from surrounding farms, have also been an issue. Right now, the biggest problem is naturally occurring arsenic, exacerbated by an [ever-shrinking volume of groundwater](#)—partly a result of excessive pumping by farmers in the midst of California's record-breaking drought.

Though residents can shower and clean with the water, it is undrinkable. For McKinney and his wife, that translates to spending an average \$160 on bottled water every month.

"We're blessed to be able to afford it, and some of our neighbors are, too," he says, taking a break from painting his house on a rare afternoon off from work. "But there are poor people out there who can't."

McKinney sits on the board of Pratt Mutual, the non-profit group that operates Matheny Tract's water system. Since the system's arsenic levels exceed EPA limits, Pratt Mutual is legally obligated to resolve the issue. In 2009, facing deteriorating pipes, little money, and a lack of government oversight, Pratt Mutual decided to seek a water system consolidation with the city of Tulare.

This was logical, as it is for many low-income county subdivisions that sit on the fringes of bigger towns in the San Joaquin Valley. When one water system merges into another, more people pay to a single entity. That should mean the cost of water is lower for customers, and that there's more revenue to maintain

infrastructure. Managerial and technical headaches are eliminated for the smaller community. Risk of contamination is lowered.

Consolidation also makes sense from a geographical standpoint: When precious water supplies and infrastructure are available mere blocks away, why refuse to extend it to people in need?



Caught between city and county governments, many of the San Joaquin Valley's poor, unincorporated communities lack the most basic services. Government neglect, disenfranchisement, and poor land-use planning have helped shape these disparities, as I explored in the [previous story in this series](#). A number of these towns have recently seen their wells go dry because of the drought. But for many more, water issues—especially contamination—are nothing new.

Because of the unprecedented drought, the gulfs in service between neighboring communities may finally begin to shrink. In June, California lawmakers passed a bill enabling the State Water Resources Control Board to mandate certain water systems to merge. The legislation was both a reaction

to the plight of dried-out communities and a result of years of work on the part of clean drinking-water advocates.

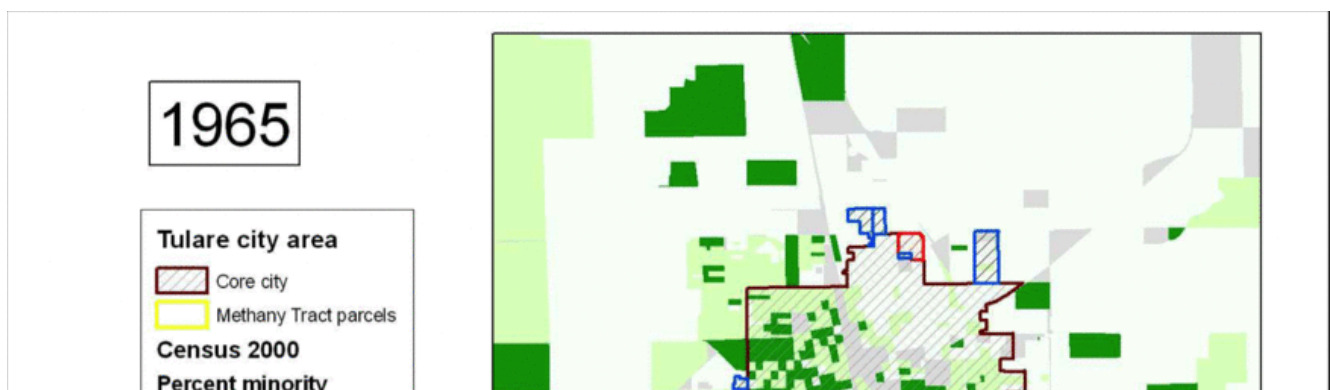
Drought consolidation, as the bill is known, is flanked by the governor's [\\$1 billion drought emergency bond package](#), as well as state drinking-water revolving funds. Both funding sources can assist disadvantaged communities facing severe water problems—even those that haven't been directly brought on by the drought.

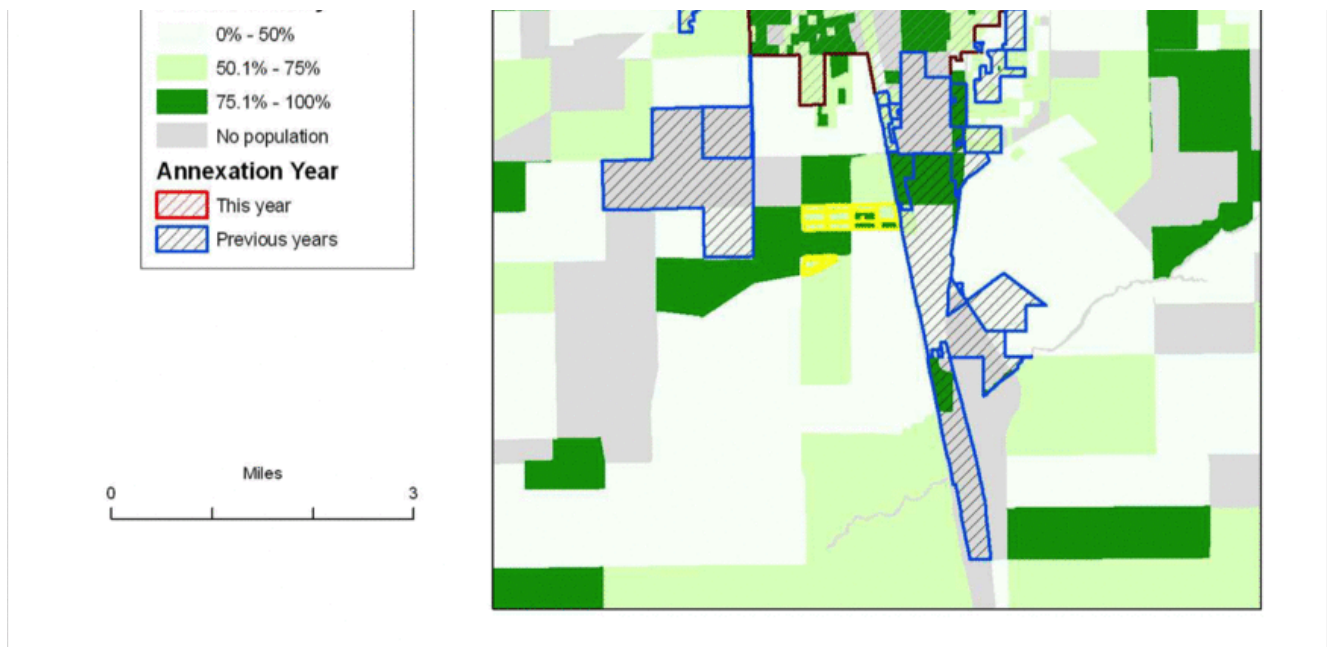
But as with so much in the San Joaquin Valley's poorest towns, consolidation has proven harder than it should be. Though there's at least one success story, many cities want neither to annex nor extend services to low-income subdivisions, because the return on investment is so low. For too many thirsty people, old squabbles, inequitable planning, and deep-rooted prejudices put a fundamental need—water—even further out of reach.

Broken promises, ulterior motives

Matheny Tract was one of many pieces of far-flung county land settled by African-American farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley during the mid-20th century. Migrating from the east, these workers and their families were often locked out of the Valley's cities by high prices or, in many cases, overtly discriminatory real-estate practices. Land buyers—traveling salesman-types—took advantage, snapping up large tracts and parceling them off to people with few other choices.

That's why, at its founding, Matheny Tract sat a fair distance away from the city of Tulare. But Tulare has crept up to it over the years. When you look at maps of the city of Tulare's annexation patterns going back to the 1960s, a pattern becomes clear.





City of Tulare annexation history and patterns of development (Based on slides courtesy of California Rural Legal Assistance)

"The city has pursued land that it can use to generate sales and property taxes," says Ashley Werner, an attorney at the [Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability](#), which provides legal assistance to Matheny Tract. "They've annexed for industrial use, residential use, commercial use, and everything else." But Tulare has never annexed Matheny Tract, or extended services to it.

So it is somewhat surprising that, when Matheny Tract asked Tulare to consider allowing them to consolidate with its water system back in 2009, the city said yes. A feasibility study was conducted and proved the connection workable. Matheny Tract applied for and obtained grant funding from the state's Drinking Water Program to pay for new pipes to connect the community to the city.

In 2011, with funding in order, the city of Tulare, Tulare County, and Matheny Tract all jointly agreed that the city would merge its water system with Matheny Tract's. That meant Pratt Mutual, the entity that manages Matheny Tract's water system, would be totally dissolved. The city of Tulare would supply water, manage infrastructure, and bill and treat Matheny Tract customers as they would any others. Construction on the new water lines began.

But in June 2014, as workers were putting finishing touches on the pipes, plans


changed: Tulare city officials announced that they were not, in fact, able to manage the consolidation. The well originally designated to serve Matheny Tract had been taken out of commission due to capacity concerns, and there was no back-up. Plus, while the new water lines were being laid in Matheny Tract, Tulare had approved connections on several hundred new homes in other developments. According to Tulare, all of this was now straining its ability to serve existing customers.

Tulare called for a hydrological study of its system, which, after several months, revealed that there was a pressure problem. Now, more than a year later, the city [has said](#) that that issue is nearly resolved. But it still won't consolidate. Despite the agreement signed by the city, county, and community, Joseph Carlini, director of Public Works of the city of Tulare, now says there are jurisdictional issues.

"I can't go in and service their pipes. I can't go in and tell them how to use their water. It's not city property. They're unincorporated," he says.

When Matheny Tract insisted that this curious backtracking violated the terms of their agreement, Tulare sued to change those terms. Now, instead of consolidating, the Tulare wants to to sell water to Matheny Tract at wholesale and let Pratt Mutual continue to handle administration and maintenance. The suit also asks for the county to clarify the city's jurisdiction. The county [has called the city's lawsuit](#) "utterly without merit." In June, Matheny Tract counter-sued to get what it agreed upon. Meanwhile, the community's brand-new pipes are still sitting dry.

"If I had the skills to turn the water on myself, I would," says McKinney, the Matheny Tract resident. "There are eight or nine people on [the city of Tulare's water board]. Eight or nine people, and they can't come together and decide they're going to help us?"



“It’s not in the city’s sights for expansion. I imagine they don’t want to build anywhere around the plant.”

— JOSEPH CARLINI

Carlini, Tulare’s public works director, believes the city *is* trying to help by offering the water at wholesale. “It’s not that we don’t want to provide service to them,” he says. “We just want some way of controlling stuff.”

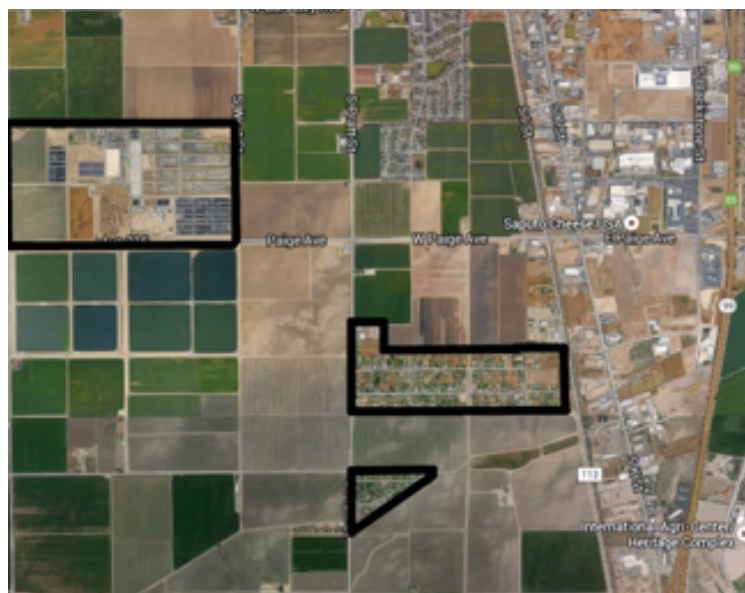
But that’s not the same as accepting Matheny Tract residents as full-fledged customers. A July 2014 letter (obtained through Werner) from Tulare City Manager Don Dorman to a county resource analyst provides some insight on what the city is really after. Dorman, who did not respond to interview requests, opens the letter (a follow-up on a meeting) by suggesting that he puts Tulare’s own growth ahead of helping Matheny Tract:

We especially appreciated County representatives’ understanding that the City’s first priority must be to maintain its water system for existing City customers and for new City development commitments.

Besides the need to cover connections in these new developments, Dorman lists several other “structural issues” involved in consolidating with Matheny Tract. These include “cross-connection pollution potential”; dealing with “parties who illegally ‘hot-tap’ into the pipeline”; the need for “sheriff protection for billing enforcers”; and, namely, the “City General Plan”:

The new City General Plan is expected to clarify that the City has no intentions of growth and development into the area southwest of the railroad tracks on the southwest portion of the City. This policy is specifically designed to protect the operational integrity of the City’s key economic asset: its newly expanded state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant. The City also intends to preserve an agricultural buffer around the plant for its operational needs ... Growth into this area... is contrary to sound land use planning.

That “agricultural buffer” around the plant is effectively what surrounds Matheny Tract.



View of Tulare’s wastewater treatment plant (outlined in upper left corner) and Matheny Tract (outlined in lower right). The diagonal route right of Matheny Tract is the railroad referred to by Dorman. (Google Earth)

Now the State Water Resources Control Board has joined the fray. In mid-August, Tulare and Matheny Tract were the first in the state to be served with letters mandating that they consolidate water systems. As of August, they have six months to come up with a plan on their own. To help, the state will fund necessary infrastructure updates, provide technical assistance, and absolve all liabilities associated with Tulare inheriting Matheny's system. But if the communities don't come to an agreement on how to do this, the state will force one. Somehow.

"The hope is that our work is going to help people overcome their issues voluntarily," says Karen Larsen, assistant deputy director of the State Water Resource Control Board's Division of Drinking Water. "We have to figure out what the issues are. There are going to be situations where it's never going to happen."

McKinney is hopeful that Matheny Tract will get the water it is due, now that the state is involved. "The question is, when? It's been six years," he says.

In spite of all the conflict, and years of separation, McKinney believes Matheny Tract would be better off if it were annexed by the city. Some years ago, he tried to petition for annexation among other residents. But he says they were fearful of losing the freedoms they have on unincorporated land: low taxes, their ability to keep farm animals and commercial vehicles, and a certain "rural" identity.

McKinney, however, envisions what the community has to gain: lighting, curbs, gutters, sewers, and a sense of equality. "If we get annexed, praise that. If we stay an island, okay," he says. "I just wanted to be treated fairly."

"Those people won't pay"

To Larsen's point, there probably are places where consolidation will never happen. One of them might be Lanare—the Fresno County subdivision I focused on in the [first story in this series](#). Much like Matheny Track, Lanare residents are predominantly African-American and Latino. Their water system is tainted with arsenic.

Riverdale, the somewhat wealthier, whiter town next door, is also

unincorporated, and has also had its share of arsenic spikes. But with more financial and managerial capital, it has been able to resolve its water problems. Lanare and its legal advocates have asked Riverdale to consider consolidation on multiple occasions, even pleading with state lawmakers to intervene. But Riverdale has continually refused.

Merging with Lanare's aging water system could be costly and full of liabilities. But legal advocates told me that the state, which currently holds Lanare's water system in receivership, is planning to drill new wells for Lanare in addition to replacing the community's aging pipes.

Between the new infrastructure, increased capacity, and all of the funds available through the state, consolidation could be a safe bet. But Lanare's debts, incurred by a mismanaged, disused arsenic treatment plant the community took a risk on years back, seem to be too much of a threat.

"Consolidation is a terrible idea," says Buddy Mendes, the county supervisor who oversees both communities, and who lives in Riverdale. "They'd never be able to pay [Riverdale] back." When I suggested that consolidation would offer greater economy of scale, he said, "For who? Not for Riverdale."

Ronald Bass, operator of Riverdale's public utility district, wouldn't respond to requests for an interview. But he has [stated his opposition to consolidation before](#): "Those people won't pay."

As in Matheny Tract, people in Lanare say Riverdale's recalcitrance is about more than just cost.

"There's always been a separation," says Connie Hammond, a 73-year-old retiree who no longer lives in Lanare but returns to volunteer with the community. "It's like, 'you're there, we're here.' They're always kind of ... looking down, actually."

Ethel Myles has lived in Lanare for nearly all of her 68 years. Much as she wants the clean water, she's not certain consolidation is the best option. "It would probably be beneficial," she says. "But they wouldn't ever accept us."



From my conversations with residents and officials, it's hard to imagine Lanare customers ever being treated the same as Riverdale customers, even if they were both paying to a single district. Another option for Lanare would be for the state to appoint a private, investor-owned utility to manage it—though residents have said they don't want that.

Mount Whitney Avenue, the same road that Lanare hinges on, serves as Riverdale's main street. There are shops and restaurants, and on the morning that I visited, a little league sign-up tent was set up on the sidewalk. I chatted with the people manning the tent about how the drought was affecting local businesses. Then I asked how Lanare was doing with water.

"Oh, them. They've got a checkered past," said one man, a state corrections officer who asked that his name not be used. Though he wasn't sure about Riverdale's official reason for rejecting consolidation, he did say this about Lanare: "They're always looking for a handout."

A community wins

Change comes incrementally, and usually by force. But it can come. The story of Cameron Creek Colony is an example.

A square in a patchwork of walnut groves, the low-income, 100-home county subdivision has a rural feel—even though Farmersville, a city of 11,000, has partly grown up around it.

Resident Roger McGill remembers what is now unimaginable: when there was water in Cameron Creek. Standing on a front porch trimmed with wind-chimes and spinners, the 69-year-old points beyond the houses across the street, toward the now-dry waterbody that gave his hometown its name. “You used to be able to take a boat out there,” he says. “The water was so high, it used to flood.”

For decades, Cameron Creek residents were self-reliant, using domestic wells with a clean supply. Then the drought came four years ago. No rainfall, no creek, and little by little, no groundwater.

“I could have never imagined this,” McGill says, surveying his dusty yard. It once had a lawn, shrubs, and flowers, he says. “Now it kind of looks like a junk pile.”

In the summer of 2014, wells in Cameron Creek began to go dry. The adjacent Farmersville water district, meanwhile, continued to serve their customers without issue.

Paul Boyer is mayor *pro tempore* of Farmersville. He’s also one of the directors of Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit that helps construct homes and make service connections for low-income families in the region. One August morning during my week in the San Joaquin Valley, he accompanied me around Cameron Creek.

Before the drought, Cameron Creek wanted nothing to do with a community water system, Boyer says. “But priorities change.”

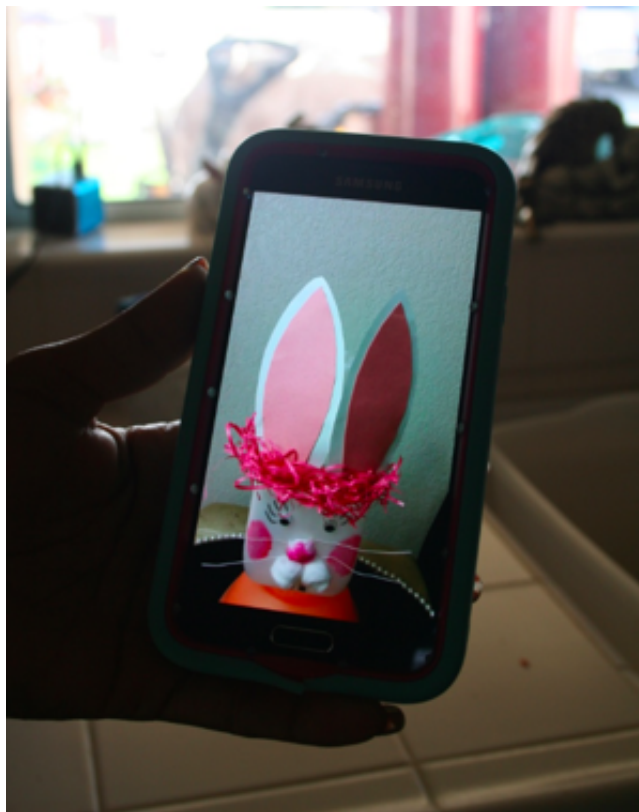
Residents badly needed water. One option, which had been debated over the years, was to petition for Cameron Creek to be annexed into Farmersville, and thereby included in its water services. By and large, Cameron Creek residents still weren’t interested in giving up their unincorporated status, for the same

reasons that many Matheny Tract residents aren't.

But Farmersville could help Cameron Creek without annexing it, and Boyer's liaison position helped them do that—in record time. Within months of the wells running dry, Farmersville secured state and federal grants to extend a water main to Cameron Creek. Residents who opted in paid a few hundred dollars to connect to the main, plus a small city hook-up fee. Less than a year later, most Cameron Creek households were customers of the Farmersville water district. They're still outside municipal limits—an arrangement that pleases Farmersville officials, too.

"The city doesn't want to be annexing an area where there's not much tax base and a lot of need," Boyer says. "It's a win-win situation."

Smart growth for small communities



Solorio's Easter egg basket made from a water jug.

In my previous story, we met Isabel Solorio, a housekeeper and community activist in Lanare. Like Vance McKinney in Matheny Tract, Solorio has hopes for her community beyond consolidation. "It's fair to have dreams," she says. "I want to keep working to have basic resources. Not luxuries, but basic needs:

water, sidewalks, streetlights, and sewers. A park where our kids can play.”

Solorio shows me pictures of how she’s been recycling her old plastic water jugs, which the state delivers to Lanare residents for free. Last spring, she sliced off the bottoms, turned them upside down, decorated them with construction paper, and filled them with candy. Poof: Easter-egg baskets for kids in Lanare.

It’s for the young people, Solorio says, that she really wants to see her community attract new development: New houses, new families, and a long-term future.

Her dream of growth might be compatible with what’s happening in the San Joaquin Valley. It’s predicted that by 2050, [nearly 7 million people](#) will live across its eight counties, about 50 percent more than do today. High-speed rail is supposed to help accommodate and shape new development in the region’s cities. “[Smart growth](#)” is often touted as a key component of the San Joaquin Valley’s future success.

But smart growth would seem to preclude places like Lanare and Matheny Tract, which have scarcely had a chance to grow at all. At the same time, sprawl continues, and new subdivisions keep popping up, far from city services. Resources—money and water—are limited. Existing communities are finding themselves competing against envisioned ones.

Driving back from Cameron Creek Colony to Self-Help Enterprises’ offices in the city of Visalia, I ask Boyer what he thinks about the future of towns like Cameron Creek Colony, Matheny Tract, and Lanare. Even with consolidation, can they become truly sustainable? Will they grow with the Valley, or will they vanish with the water?

“I think you want to provide services to make these communities as livable as possible,” he says. “But not develop more of them.”

Next week, we’ll see how that’s going.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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CITYLAB

For California's Drought Towns, the Next Challenge Is Growth

As development booms in the San Joaquin Valley, poor communities see both opportunity and heartbreak.

LAURA BLISS | [@mslaurabliss](#) | Oct 19, 2015 | [3 Comments](#)



A sign is posted near a cluster of vacant homes in Sacramento County, just north of California's San Joaquin Valley. (REUTERS/Robert Galbraith)

Editor's note: This story is the last in a three-part series on the future of the San Joaquin Valley's unincorporated communities. Read parts [one](#) and [two](#).

FRESNO, Calif.—In the 600-person, unincorporated community of Lanare, travel options are limited. One bus heads 30 miles to Fresno in the morning, then comes back in the evening. It takes roughly two hours each way.

So Isabel Solorio, a 50-year-old housekeeper and community activist, relies on her old Chevy Suburban to get to doctors' appointments, clients' homes, and stores. Though tomatoes, asparagus, garlic, and grapes all grow within miles of Lanare, there's nowhere to buy truly affordable produce short of Fresno. She goes there weekly, and buys everything she can.

"Paying for so much all at once is very expensive," she says. On the floor of her gleaming kitchen in Lanare sit small pallets of melons and tomatoes. "Gas to the big store is also expensive." Between her needs and her husband's commute to the fields, Solorio estimates they spend more than \$200 per week on fuel for hundreds of miles traveled.

In the sprawling, disconnected San Joaquin Valley, home to four million residents, a lot of people get around like Solorio does. Emissions from transportation, mostly from trucks, are what primarily make the region's air quality among the worst in the nation, despite some improvements in the last decade. As [many as 21 percent of adults have asthma here](#)—Solorio included—[and 24 percent of children](#). There's a disparate impact at play: The zip codes with the highest rate of respiratory risk have poor and predominantly Hispanic populations. And lately, the drought has made air even more unbreathable.

Air pollution is another byproduct of the San Joaquin Valley's legacy of short-sighted, inequitable land-use planning. Other outcomes, as we've seen in [previous stories](#), include dry wells in the midst of drought, mismanaged, contaminated water systems, and septic tanks that leach into the aquifer. We've seen how [poor, unincorporated communities of color](#) are disproportionately affected by these gaps in basic services, and are often disenfranchised by local governance structures from [finding lasting solutions](#).

Yet more people are coming to the San Joaquin Valley. Projected to gain three million residents by 2050, the region is growing faster than nearly anywhere else in the country. [According to forecasts](#), most new migrants will be Hispanic and have low incomes. Some will be professionals priced out of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Still others will be wealthier retirees, moving in from the coasts. The [advent of high-speed rail](#) will bring in even more new faces from across the demographic spectrum.

Will the valley's growth take shape as it has historically has—spread out and

uneven? Or will it be something more sustainable and just? And, crucially, where will the water come from?

In the heart of the valley, Fresno County offers some indications.

A new era in planning

In 2008, California became first in the nation to pass a law linking climate change with the way we build towns and cities. The landmark Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act, [SB 375](#), required regions to start planning with a goal to reduce greenhouse gases, mainly by reducing trips in cars. This is meant to be achieved with effective new transit options, denser housing through infill and mixed-use development, and updated, “greener” infrastructure to support it all.

“Smart growth,” as this planning framework is often called, discourages sprawling into undeveloped, isolated places, and encourages redeveloping what already exists. In the agricultural mecca of the San Joaquin Valley, it also means conserving prime farmland.

“The entire state needs to transform the way we plan and invest. If you leave them out, rural communities will never be able to contribute.”

— PHOEBE SEATON



In growing Fresno County, some towns are taking steps to contribute to the state's goals. In particular, the city of Fresno, the largest in the San Joaquin Valley, has been encouraging infill, revamping its inner core, and developing green spaces. (James Fallows has detailed Fresno's renaissance at [The Atlantic](#).) In the town of Reedley, 25 miles southeast of Fresno, a planned [mixed-use housing development](#) will run on solar power and send its treated wastewater back into the aquifer. Hanford, a town of 54,000, has created a successful vanpool program used mainly by low-income workers, one of the first of its kind in the valley.

But in a county that's strapped for cash and searching for a broader tax base, "smart growth" is getting lost in the economics and politics of general growth. Subdivisions just keep getting developed. And some of these new towns may wind up with problems that poor, unincorporated communities have lived with for years.

Sprawl dies hard

On an August evening around sunset, the light on Millerton Lake is beautiful, if a little ominous. Bathtub rings etched into the soft brown foothills around the lake glow pink. In California's fourth year of drought, the lake—really an artificial reservoir—is at [35 percent capacity](#).

Standing on the massive boat ramp that slopes to the water's edge, I can see the frames of houses perched on a crest. There's lots of new development in this area, 35 minutes northeast of the city of Fresno. Tucked further back in the hills, for example, lie the beginnings of a master-planned, unincorporated community called Millerton New Town.

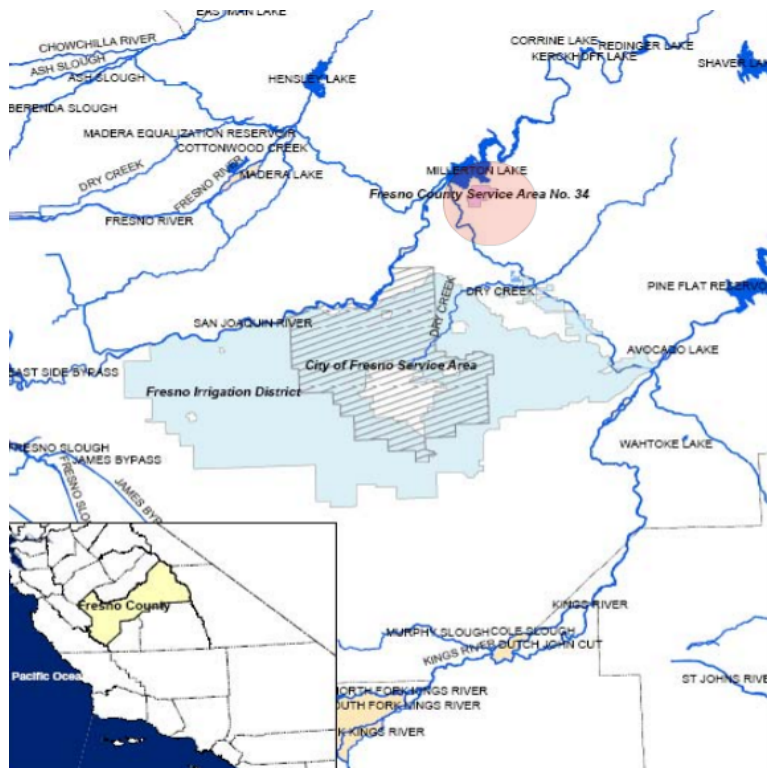
At least 4,500 homes are slated for construction, enough to house [10,000 to 12,000 people, according to planners](#). Some houses are already occupied or ready to be, and run from around \$300,000 to \$900,000 based on a Zillow search. Blueprints for a pharmacy school, projected to draw [2,000 students and nearly 300 faculty and staff](#), are also taking shape. Roughly half of the student body will be housed on the school's campus.

Millerton New Town had been a 2,000-acre twinkle in Fresno County's general plan as far back as the mid-1980s. Officials tell me it never progressed because

of concerns about [service reliability](#). But in recent years, new development across the Madera County border got Fresno County eyeing Millerton more aggressively. In 2011, the state granted permission for the community to source water from Millerton Lake. That same year, developers broke ground.

"We thought, before our residents jump into new houses in Madera and we lose the tax base, let's at least provide them an opportunity to stay here," says Henry Perea, one of five Fresno County supervisors.

Millerton New Town may very well provide short-term revenues to the county, but from long-term environmental and financial standpoints, it risks unsustainability, officials and experts told me. It may also perpetuate challenges of water access and affordability that have plagued the region for so long.



Fresno County Service Area 34, circled in pink, covers Millerton New Town. (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation)

"Millerton New Town appears to spit in the face of SB 375," says Mike Dozier, executive director of both Fresno State University's Office of Economic and Community Development and the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, a non-profit promoting regional growth. "Those students are not all going to be living on campus. People that work there aren't going to want to live there. They will be commuting from Fresno."

Right now, there is only one access road that serves Millerton New Town. It's the same one that boaters and jet-skiers take to get to the lake's recreation area, and the same one revelers take to roll the dice at a nearby tribal casino. That road will likely need widening to serve more vehicles going up and down the hill.

"This is going to contribute to the greenhouse gas situation," Dozier says. Analyses of [different scenarios of growth](#) for Fresno County—developed by local planners under SB 375—bear out his conclusion.

Bernard Jimenez, Fresno County's deputy director of planning, [has said](#) there's a possibility that light rail will one day serve the area, alongside other environmental mitigations. Developers [have argued](#) that the Millerton community will be self-sufficient, with its own services and shopping, so residents won't need to travel.

Either way, Jimenez believes that Millerton will be financially sound: "This is development that covers its own costs, and the community will maintain its own infrastructure. That's been a fundamental policy of the county for decades."

But that too is questionable, since county supervisors have encouraged the development by waiving the public-impact fees that developers would normally pay. These fees are usually considered key to growth "paying for itself"—providing a funding source to build things like a sheriff sub-station, a library, an updated water treatment plant, and any other county facility that might eventually be necessary for a new community. That means residents may wind up needing to pay for those things out of pocket—which they may or may not be able to.

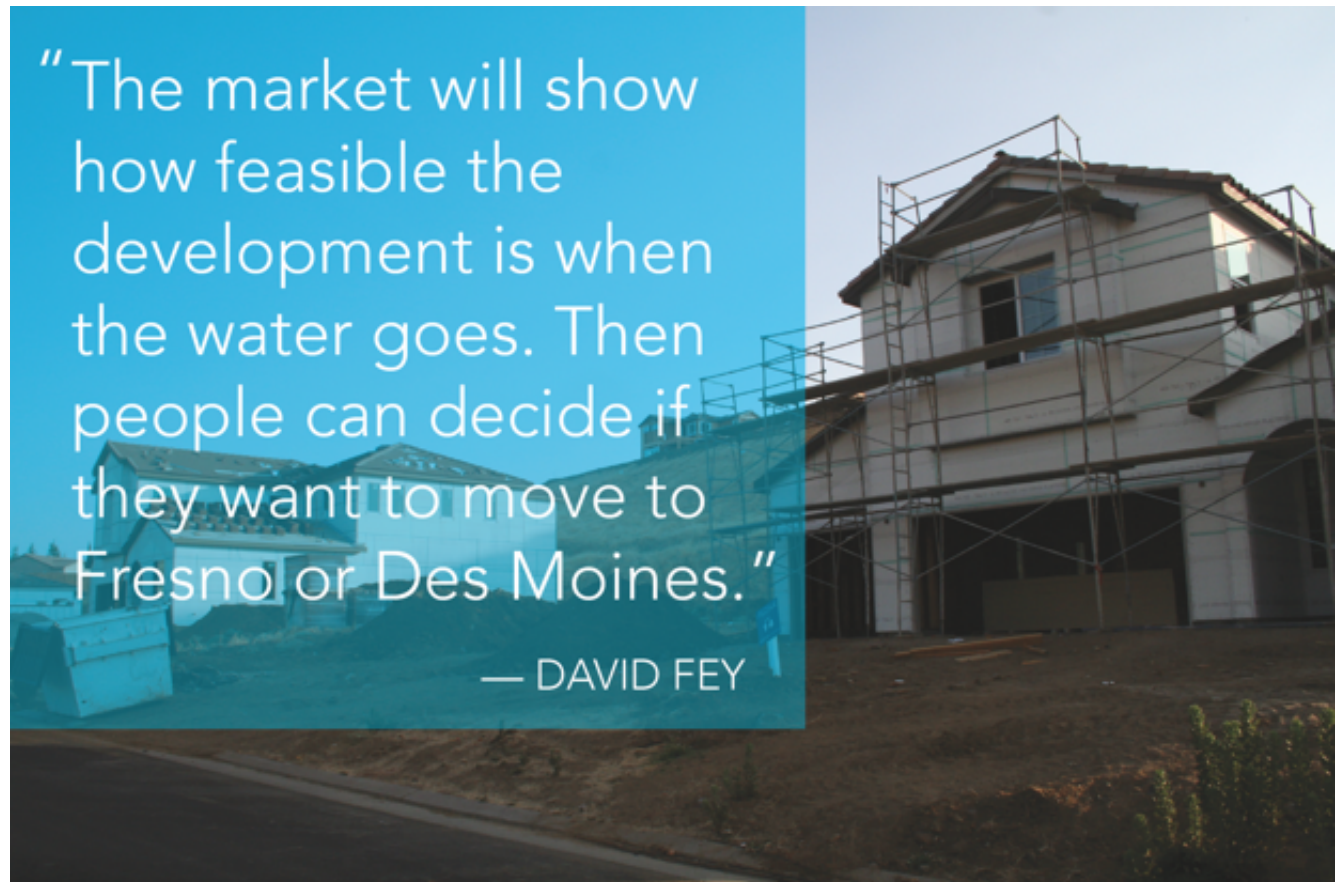
Then there's the matter of water. El Niño or not, there will be future droughts. Water will become more expensive for all Californians, but especially so for residents of places like Millerton New Town—since, as an unincorporated community, it will have to support its water system without the economy of scale or managerial consistency afforded by a city.

Jimenez says the county has been stringent about its water-resource policies for new development. "Millerton New Town will not be relying on

groundwater, but on surface water," he says. "I see that as a big distinction."

But in the past four years of drought, Millerton Lake water deliveries have been [anything but certain](#), [even for longtime customers](#). Some developments adjacent to New Town rely on groundwater alone, which is only getting more scarce.

Whatever their water source, potential homebuyers in any new subdivision will need to keep their eyes open to the possibility of water costs becoming burdensome—or even of water running out, Perea told me. He said it's conceivable that Millerton New Town will wind up needing to truck water in from somewhere else (as [some other California communities are doing](#)). He mentioned how the planned community of [Appaloosa Acres, to the north](#), has run out of groundwater and is now considering piping water in from Fresno.



What would happen if Millerton New Town ran dry? David Fey, executive officer of the Fresno County [Local Agency Formation Commission](#) followed that possibility to its economic endpoint.

"Ultimately, the market will show how feasible the development is when the

water goes down," he says. "Then residents can decide if they want move to Fresno or Des Moines."

Of course, residents of poor, unincorporated communities have been struggling with water supply issues for years, and don't generally have the luxury of packing up for Iowa. Solorio feels discriminated against when she sees the county putting resources into a community that doesn't yet exist, while refusing to invest in her very real, struggling hometown. In so many meetings with county officials and in hearings in Sacramento, she says, she's been made to feel like she's asking for a handout.

"When you're investing in other places, there's not a problem," she tells me. "But when we ask, it is drama."

Jimenez says this comparison is apples to oranges, citing again his belief that developments in the Millerton area will be self-sustaining, unlike poor communities such as Lanare, where maintaining services has been a financial and managerial challenge.

But Perea, the county supervisor, is sympathetic to Solorio's critique. Even though he has supported the development of Millerton New Town, he says he would make the same argument if he were her. So why doesn't the county attend to places like Lanare the way it attends to wealthier residents?

Revenues. "It's age-old politics," he says. "Politicians react to one constituency more and less to another. You see the inequities of our decision-making every day."

The dream of smart growth

Lanare has about 125 houses and not much else. There is a two-room community center with a grassless baseball diamond behind it, and a single convenience store on Mount Whitney Avenue. Across the road are mostly fields.

It takes some imagination to see Lanare as something more, something bigger. But that's what Solorio wants: growth. She believes Lanare can support new, affordable housing for more people, eventually. "This is a good idea for the

community," she says. "There is so much extra land."

"Politicians react to one constituency more and less to another. You see the inequities of our decision-making every day."

— SUPERVISOR HENRY PEREA



There are certainly plenty of vacant parcels, and homes that sorely need updating to modern codes. But like many chronically underfunded, overlooked communities, Lanare lacks the most basic civic building blocks. The water system, namely, needs improvement: Community wells have been tainted with arsenic for years, as we learned in [previous stories](#). Though the state is lending support to building a new system, the community still needs to be able to run and maintain it at a sustainable cost—which takes, among other things, economy of scale.

"If this community is growing more, then we have more taxes for the CSD," says Solorio, referring to the volunteer-run committee that manages infrastructure. "Then the community uses the money to improve things."

It's a catch-22, of course. To grow, the community needs a reliable water system. To have a reliable water system, the community could use growth.

Yet Solorio isn't alone in wanting something more for her tiny town—and believing it can achieve it. Vance McKinney, the truck driver in Matheny Tract

we met in [the previous story](#), expressed the same thought. North of Lanare in Fresno County, other unincorporated communities are [banding together to support a collective economic development plan](#).

At a certain point, to entertain dreams of growth—and to simply be sustainable—these communities need capital. Given the tenets of smart growth, the state should want to invest in existing communities, too.

In 2012, on the heels of SB 375, California passed a bill requiring that a portion of the state's cap-and-trade revenues go to smart-growth projects in disadvantaged communities. Established soon after, the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) grant program awards those dollars to proposals for housing, transit, or infrastructure improvements that can be shown to reduce greenhouse gases. It is becoming an important avenue by which the poorest Californians can leverage the state's planning resources—but rural communities are still being left out.

In its first year, only one project serving the rural San Joaquin Valley won AHSC money: That vanpool program for farmworkers in the small city of Hanford received funds to expand.

It's hard for rural towns to prove, in numbers, that they can reduce greenhouse gases through things like denser housing or transit, says Veronica Garibay, co-director of the Leadership Counsel. Held up against communities with existing infrastructure like bus stops and sidewalks, places without them have smaller returns on investment. "You're never going to get the same results as West Oakland," Garibay says.

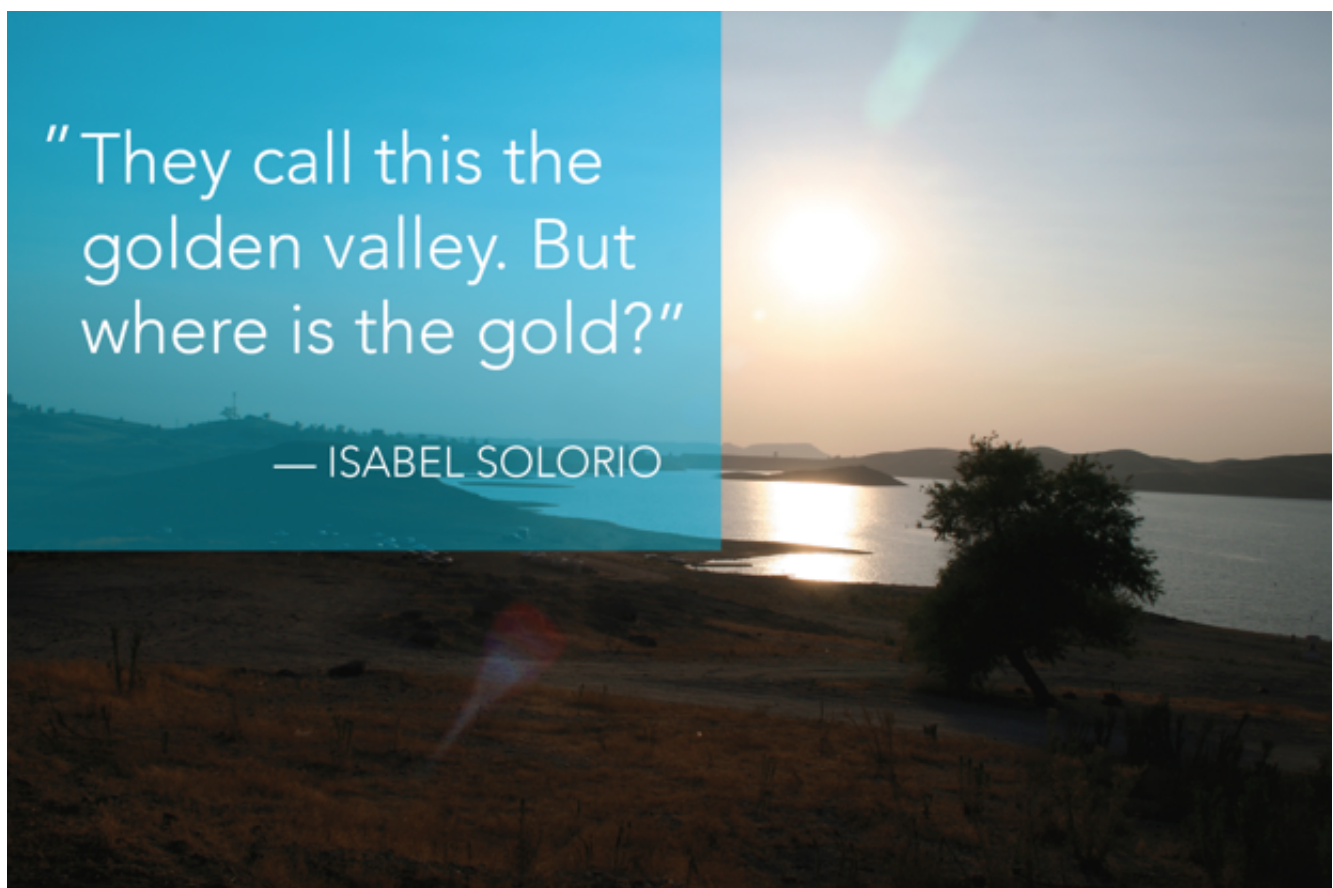
Yet the valley's poor, rural communities are disproportionately exposed to the environmental hazards that can result from bad planning. "They have all the need there is," says Dozier, the Fresno State economic development expert. "But they haven't been getting their share of cap-and-trade dollars."

This year, there are [new guidelines for the AHSC grants](#), and a new scoring system for proposals that weights greenhouse gas reductions and other co-benefits more proportionally. Plus, a pot of the money is now set aside for rural communities.

The hope now among advocates is that this funding can be used to help plan for growth in places like Lanare. Once it has a better water system in place—which could be within the next year—Lanare may be better positioned to apply.

Still, it seems that the disadvantaged, rural communities most likely to get the grants are those that are actually closer to cities—[East Porterville](#), or [Matheny Tract](#), for example. Those communities badly need funds, too, and they're more geographically connected to existing transit, schools, and services next door.

Mike McCoy directed the committee that oversees the grant program up until this past July, and continues to advise it. He says he's most interested in seeing greenhouse gas reductions accrue over time "by building affordable housing in rural cities near schools, markets, services, and in sufficient quantity to create real community." That, he says, is what's most likely to reduce long drives in search of services.



Advocates say there needs to be more funding to address inequities in rural communities that is separate from greenhouse gas reductions, and McCoy

agrees. There have been attempts in the state legislature, specifically by Senate president *pro tempore* [Kevin de León](#), to dedicate this kind of money. They haven't passed yet, but de León is likely to try again. Says McCoy: "If our fiscal condition permits it, he might win the second time around."

In the meantime, the funding framework that's come out of SB 375 may continue to leave out communities that are starting from scratch. That's a shame not only for places like Lanare, but for the whole state, says Seaton, the co-director of the Leadership Counsel.

"There is an argument for these communities that goes beyond fairness," she says. "We as a state need to transform the way we plan and invest. If you keep leaving rural communities out, they will never be able to contribute."

"This is my home"

The mentality of sprawl may be particularly strong in Fresno County, but across the valley, development trends in the same vein: "[New towns](#)" [are popping up all over the place](#). The drought has shed light on deep disparities that short-sighted land-use planning has helped create for the valley's poorest communities; it is grim to imagine what the next drought [might reveal about wealthier ones](#).

As for water, there will need to be more ways to capture and stretch it out as California grows and dries. Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, says a web of approaches are needed: "It's storage, conservation, recycling, stormwater capture, and desalination in appropriate cases." Developing ways to replenish groundwater supplies will be critical.

She adds, "Just giving out land-use and building permits when there might not be water isn't actually doing people a favor."

Linking water with land use will be a major challenge for the state in years to come, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

Meanwhile, it's not clear what the future holds for the communities we've visited in this series. Lanare, Matheny Tract, and East Porterville are at different stages in attaining reliable access to water. Others throughout the valley are

further behind. It shouldn't be this hard for Californians to have a resource [that is their right](#). In some places, politics are moving out of the way, slowly and painfully. In other places, politics are not budging at all.

There is hope, at least, within Solorio. On a Monday afternoon, she and seven other Lanare residents gather on folding chairs in the community center, talking about what they hope to create here someday. Connie Hammond describes a sack-lunch program for those struggling to afford groceries. Ethel Myles wishes she had a sewer, so that she wouldn't have to worry about the septic tank overflowing when all of her grandchildren come over. Solorio talks about a park she saw one day in Fresno, where recycled water pours down from buckets to splash in. It gave her an idea for building a play structure out of recycled tires. "We need something like that, for kids to play in," Solorio says. But even a simple play structure will require money that the community just doesn't have yet.

"They call this the golden valley," she sighs. "But where is the gold?"

Solorio is going to keep looking.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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