

A new vision for Calaveras: No more sprawl

Supervisors say general plan should reflect new direction



Enterprise photo by Colin Rigley

Listening to speakers at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors session on the general plan were, from left, County Administrative Officer Brent Harrington and Supervisors Tom Tryon, Steve Wilensky, Bill Claudino, Merita Callaway, and Russ Thomas.

By Colin Rigley

Calaveras Enterprise, Friday October 26, 2007

Sprawling rural communities may become a thing of the past as the county updates its general plan.

Calaveras County supervisors were largely supportive of taking the county in a different direction, moving from sprawling developments to more centralized, denser communities.

"In order to have open space, you're going to have to plan for more dense population," Supervisor Bill Claudino said.

The Community Development Agency, a county department, and the county's general plan consultant, Mintier & Associates, polled supervisors on key issues for the "visioning" phase of the general plan update. With board direction, the agency and Mintier will go out to six communities – San Andreas, supervisorial District

2, Valley Springs, Murphys, Copperopolis and Arnold – in November and December to develop a draft vision statement.

The decision to take the county in a new direction was not made lightly.

"I want to decide where we're going to grow and where we're not going to grow and have the courage to make that decision," Supervisor Merita Callaway said.

"It's going to take a lot of courage on the Board of Supervisors to make sure the general plan is definitive." A common sentiment among the supervisors was that condensed populations in town centers would create the economy of scale the county, and particularly special districts, are desperately in need of. Supervisor Tom Tryon said the county can do a much better job with its infrastructure. He said there is an overdependence

on septic systems and well water, but that those traditional types of utilities are becoming less viable as the county grows. Surface water is going largely untapped, he said, despite increasing competition from other counties for water rights. "For all intents and purposes, the groundwater in this county is used up," Claudino said.

Several sewer districts in the county have also imposed moratoriums on new sewer hookups while their current facilities are at, or above capacity, Claudino said.

Dense populations could allow sewer and water districts to provide hookups more easily, rather than having to reach isolated and spread out developments, the supervisors said.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky placed affordable housing at the top of his priority list, saying that Calaveras housing is currently available only to the upper economic tiers.

"When the family making the median income can't touch even lower quintile housing, we have a problem," he said.

Claudino also touched on affordable housing, and suggested that the county consider mixed-use zoning, which typically takes the form of residences above restaurants and other businesses. Some people may not want, or be able to afford, large and expensive houses, and they may prefer an apartment atop a business, he said.

Calaveras' struggling economy was also a problem the board wanted to address, and again something that was advocated through dense communities.

Residents in seven communities who were polled in the first phases of the general plan update also listed poor economic development as one

of the top three problems in both communities and the county as a whole.

To revitalize the economy, Claudino said, businesses are going to need assurance of customers.

"The rooftops and the businesses have a symbiotic relationship," Claudino said.

"There's no way around it." Supervisor Russ Thomas was in favor of denser populations, but wanted to ensure that large open spaces are maintained between towns.

"None of us want to see unending rooftops," he said.

Wilensky said the lack of retail in the county forces Calaveras residents to "zip all over the place," which puts additional stress on the road system.

"We're spending all our money in other counties," he said.

Dave Tanner, a Valley Springs resident, agreed with the call to condense Calaveras' population.

"If we want affordable housing we have to increase density," he said.

Talk about the timeliness of the general plan update circulated through the meeting. The word of the day was "expedite," spurred by the meeting announcement that called it a way to expedite the process.

County officials juggled the expediency of the update with the quality of the final general plan, but did not hammer out an exact timeline.

Callaway was opposed to expediting the update, and urged the board to take the necessary time to get it right.

Thomas, on the other hand, believed that the county could get through the update process quickly while still producing a beneficial document for the county.

Steve Elias, speaking on

behalf of the Sierra Club, warned the county against rushing the update.

“I remember what happened in 1996,” Elias said, referring to the last general plan update, which has since been found by Mintier to be legally deficient. “To talk about expediting (the general plan) ... I think that’s definitely going down the wrong path.”

Tom Infusino, a member of the Calaveras County Planning Coalition, stressed to the board the importance of keeping the update process open to new ideas. He said he had prayed for a cordial and open general plan update. Most importantly, Infusino said, the update needs to take account of all the different opinions without casting aside unpopular ideas or homogenizing everything.

“This is a time for listening to input,” Infusino said.

“I really do encourage you to be courageous, to be creative,” said Karen Pekarick, First 5 Calaveras executive director.