

Calaveras County at a Crossroads

When the Board of Supervisors contracted with the respected firm of Mintier & Associates to examine the County's General Plan, it indicated that the County was serious about doing something about our outdated, inconsistent, and legally vulnerable General Plan.

Many citizens' groups, including CAP and the Calaveras Planning Coalition, have warned the Board that the General Plan's weaknesses could put all development in Calaveras County at risk, something no one wants.

Today, the Mintier Report confirms these fears, finding, "**The Calaveras County General Plan does not meet statutory requirements, is ... outdated, (and) ... based on conditions, laws, and concepts from the early 1980s.**" (*Mintier Report (10/12/06)*, pg. 10) The Report indicates there is a serious deficiency in the required standards of population density and building intensity in the Land Use element.

So, while County citizens and taxpayers learn the County has legally inadequate standards of population and building density, we also learn that developers have made extensive plans for major population and building growth in Calaveras County, especially west of Highway 49.

Supervisor Erickson told CAP & the Coalition in early July that the County had received the draft Mintier report, and that it was under review. The Coalition waited eight weeks before attempting to find out the status of the Report, and filed a Public Records Act request only after receiving vague and contradictory responses to our requests to see the document.

Ours is not the first County to be faced with an old and deficient General Plan while struggling to cope with major development and population growth. In El Dorado County, their process led to confrontation, political battles, lawsuits, and court injunctions. Many believe El Dorado County today is a prime example of how the foothills should NOT grow, and bitter, expensive political fighting continues there still.

There has to be a better way. Instead of sliding into the familiar confrontation, developers against community groups, consultants against consultants, going to court, circulating petitions, fighting initiative and election battles, can't we try another path?

Court battles cost money. We've watched while important County public agencies have weakened themselves by choosing to take their chances on litigation, rather than addressing their problems openly and responsibly. The County should not risk taxpayer dollars by approving major new subdivisions and defending an indefensible General Plan, while the Sheriff is under staffed, the jail inadequate, and other critical County services go under funded.

Since the issue of whether Calaveras County needs a comprehensive update of the General Plan seems no longer in doubt, the remaining issues seem to boil down to: 1) how can local communities translate their own goals and objectives into the process, and 2) what to do about the huge growth going on while the General Plan is being updated.

The first question should be easy. At least rhetorically, the County, the developers, and community groups like CAP and the Coalition agree that local communities should have the right to decide for themselves how, and how much, they want to grow. It should not be rocket science to craft a process that allows citizens easy opportunities to follow, understand, and provide the decisive input into our updated General Plan.

The second question involves the very real specter of a court-imposed subdivision moratorium in Calaveras County. No one wants this.

Development projects, by law, have to conform to a lawful General Plan. With our current General Plan, almost any major project that comes up for approval could be challenged in court, because the Plan itself is deficient. It is not far-fetched that a judge could issue an injunction that brings subdivisions to a halt in Calaveras County.

There is another way. Let's agree to bring those proposed major subdivision projects into the General Plan update process. Building on the 17,000 existing undeveloped lots in Calaveras County would be unaffected, but major proposed subdivision projects requiring General Plan Amendments and zoning changes should be brought into the discussion on our future, and considered within the context of the updated County General Plan.

Naturally, developers are suspicious of anything that might seem to limit their return on investment. That's their job. It's human nature to oppose what seems to be opposing you.

This is a better way. By including these proposed major subdivision projects into the General Plan update process, developers will participate as the citizens and taxpayers build a common vision for Calaveras County. Let's try this better way for our communities to grow, one based on communication and respect between citizens, developers, landowners, and County government.

At the crossroads: down the first path we see cooperation and compromise, and a plan for growth in Calaveras County for a generation. Down the other path lies confrontation, delay, division, and political upheaval.

Let's take the first path.