

Pressed county reveals draft plan

Published: October 6, 2006

Union Democrat Online

By SUNNY LOCKWOOD

A draft report evaluating Calaveras County's General Plan was released this week after a citizens' group pressured officials to see it.

Calaveras Planning Coalition — a collection of neighborhood groups from San Andreas, Valley Springs, Copperopolis, Paloma and Wallace concerned with growth in the county — has been asking to see the draft since it was completed in late June.

Ward LaValley, coalition facilitator, said the group wanted to look at the draft to see if planning consultants Mintier and Associates had highlighted weaknesses the coalition has been pointing out for months.

Coalition Attorney Thomas Infusino made a California Public Records Act request Sept. 18 for the draft report. The County Counsel's office released the draft Monday.

Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Merita Callaway said there were reasons the draft was not released to the public right away.

"It is an administrative draft, not a public document," she said. "That means there may be spelling errors, legal issues, mistakes. With an administrative draft, staff comments on it and sends it back to the consultant to correct the errors, before the public document is released."

Callaway said she's offended at assertions by some people that county supervisors are trying to hide something from the public.

She said the final report is due out next week and is on the board's Oct. 23 agenda for discussion. The final report, not the draft, is what people should focus on, she said.

"So now they have (the draft). So what?" she said. "Now they'll start commenting on things that might not be in the final document. It is the final document we're going to deal with."

Infusino, whose office is in Pine Grove, countered that Calaveras Planning Coalition was looking for direction.

"Until the report is released, the General Plan update process will have no direction and will not proceed," he said. "The group wants the General Plan updated because the current plan is out of date and not in compliance with state law."

The 73-page draft document, supports Infusino's assertion, describing in detail the inadequacies of the current General Plan and recommending improvements.

"The current General Plan policy is based on conditions, laws and concepts from the early 1980s," the draft states.

Some pages in the draft document have sections of text blacked out.

In a letter to Infusino, Assistant County Counsel David Sirias said the redacted portions of the draft black out county counsel comments, which "are protected by the attorney-client privilege...."

The General Plan is the document guiding the county's land use decisions. Calaveras County's General Plan has seven elements: land use, circulation, conservation, open space, noise, safety and housing.

Infusino said five of those elements are not in compliance with state law.

"For example, the safety element lacks designated evacuation routes in case of emergencies," he said. "The draft report outlines desperately needed improvements in the general plan."

La Valley said a coalition priority is to include citizen participation in developing the updated General Plan.

He said developers are moving ahead on projects with no community input.

"And they're donating money to the county to hire a planner to streamline development projects in the Valley Springs area," he said. "We think that's a conflict of interest."

Infusino said it's inappropriate for the county to continue approving development projects before the General Plan is updated.

But Callaway pointed out that the General Plan update will take about three years.

"It's not going to happen any faster with the administrative draft being made available," she said. "It disappoints me that people are saying we're trying to hide information or manipulate the report. What are we trying to hide? A spelling error? A misinterpretation of a county code?"

"I understand their frustrations with growth," she continued. "I'm one of the most sympathetic board members. I've been saying that our infrastructure hasn't kept up with development and we need to address that. But there isn't an easy answer."

Contact Sunny Lockwood at slockwood@uniondemocrat.com or at 736-1234.