

3 SEATS OPEN ON CALAVERAS BOARD

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SAN ANDREAS - Land use issues loom large in this year's races for three seats on the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors.

Which candidates voters choose could determine whether the county is able to resolve more than half a decade of gridlock that has often pitted planners against property rights advocates and has frustrated developers and conservationists alike.

Supervisor Tom Tryon, 67, is the county's longest serving supervisor, having been on the board since 1984. He's also a strong advocate for planning growth in existing town centers close to infrastructure such as sewers and roads.

Tryon has repeatedly argued that it has been a mistake for county officials to allow housing to sprawl into rural subdivisions with 5-, 10- and 20-acre lots. He says such sprawl burdens taxpayers because such properties do not pay enough in taxes to cover the cost of county services.

Tryon is running for an eighth term representing District 4, which includes Angels Camp and Copperopolis.

Former Angels Camp Mayor Debbie Ponte, 52, is challenging Tryon. Ponte hasn't staked out strong positions on land use but says she's sympathetic to both those concerned about massive growth planned in the Copperopolis area, for example, and those who advocate loosening regulations in an effort to spur development.

Ponte has sought to contrast her personal style with that of Tryon, who is known for being blunt.

"My opinion really doesn't matter," Ponte said of how she will decide issues. "It is the feeling and opinions of the people I represent."

In the races for District 1 and District 2, candidates have staked out clear views on land use.

In District 1, which includes Burson, Wallace, downtown Valley Springs and San Andreas, incumbent Gary Tofanelli, 58, of Burson faces a challenge from restaurant owner Cliff Edson, 56, of San Andreas.

Tofanelli, though not opposed to planning per se, has intervened a number of times during his first term to reign in what he saw as inappropriate efforts to use land-use designations to restrict the options of landowners.

"I'm in favor of property rights. I'm in favor of what built this country," Tofanelli said Sept. 19 during a candidate forum in the Veterans Hall in downtown Valley Springs.

Tofanelli intervened, for example, when a community plan for Valley Springs using a California Department of Transportation grant raised the ire of a number of property owners.

Tofanelli developed an alternative plan that gives property owners more freedom to carve rural home lots or establish highway commercial ventures in areas away from the Valley Springs town center. Tofanelli also persuaded the Board of Supervisors to vote to make his plan the preferred option to be used as the county updates its General Plan for land use.

Edson, during the same candidate forum, noted that he worked on a community mobility plan in San Andreas that he said had the backing of most of the community.

In contrast, Edson said a lingering division the two Valley Springs plans created exists between those wanting to restrain sprawl and those advocating property rights.

"It's going to be kind of miserable around here for a while if people don't learn to work together," he said during the Valley Springs forum.

Edson said he admires and supports the efforts of Calaveras County Planning Director Rebecca Willis to complete a long-awaited update of the General Plan that guides county growth.

"She knows what she's doing," he said.

Willis, in general, has said she is trying to craft a General Plan that meets state legal standards, including those for addressing the cumulative environmental impacts of growth. Flaws in the existing General Plan have stalled a number of projects over environmental issues.

The race in District 2 pits long-time conservationist Chris Wright, 40, against conservative business owner Bryce Randall, 55.

Wright is on leave from his job as executive director of the Foothill Conservancy, an environmental organization that advocates to preserve the region's farms, forests and rivers.

Randall is a former computer chip designer who owns and operates West Point Trading post as well as a hunting and fishing business in West Point.

Randall says he wants to limit government intervention in economic life. And during a forum recorded for cable television early in the campaign, Randall made it clear he views the work of groups such as the Foothill Conservancy as part of a United Nations-sanctioned effort to impose socialism on communities around the world.

Wright, for his part, does advocate the "triple bottom line" of developing healthy communities, economies and landscapes.

Property rights advocates who believe that the U.N. is behind an effort to subvert property rights tend to see that "triple bottom line" slogan as part of that campaign.

Both Wright and Randall are seeking their first term. Current District 2 Supervisor Steve Wilensky decided not to seek a third term.

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