

PROBLEMS DERAIL 800-HOME LODGE PROJECT



Calaveras County planners said they had a number of concerns about a 243-acre project at the scenic Sawmill Lake in Copperopolis, including the conversion of 157 acres of natural resource lands into homes. Michael McCollum/ Record File 2012Michael McCollum/The Record

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SAN ANDREAS - Worries over sloppy environmental studies, lawsuits and destruction of habitat last week prompted the Calaveras County Planning Commission to deny the application for an 800-home project in Copperopolis.

Development giant Castle & Cooke hopes to build the Sawmill Lake housing tract next to the Copperopolis Town Square development it already operates at Little John Road and Highway 4.

Frustrated by what they see as years of delays and repeated environmental studies, Castle & Cooke officials over the summer had their attorneys send the county a letter threatening legal action if officials did not promptly process and act on the development application.

Now, it appears that strategy might have backfired.

Calaveras County Planning Department Director Rebecca Willis told the commission on Thursday that she and her staff over the past six months put aside other work to do a detailed review of Sawmill Lake.

Willis said she found a number of problems with the 243-acre project, including the conversion of 157 acres of natural resource lands to homes.

The General Plan that governs land use in the county calls for protecting natural resource lands from development. Complicating the matter, the General Plan fails to meet legal standards for how to analyze and mitigate the loss of natural resource lands.

Willis told commissioners that in a famous 1984 case, Calaveras County lost a lawsuit because it issued a permit based on an inadequate General Plan.

"We are cited as an example of what not to do in state literature on general plans," Willis said.

Willis said that it will be much easier to resolve environmental issues for Sawmill Lake and many other projects once the county completes an adequate update of its General Plan.

Castle & Cook Vice President Dave Haley said his company had done adequate work to resolve the environmental impacts of Sawmill Lake. On Thursday, Haley reversed his company's earlier request for a prompt decision, instead asking commissioners to postpone any decision rather than deny the project.

Haley said if Castle & Cooke has to submit a new application under the new General Plan that county officials expect to finish within a year, then it will put his company "in jeopardy of missing the next economic cycle."

Planning commissioners were clearly sympathetic to Haley, but a narrow majority heeded Willis' recommendation that they steer clear of likely lawsuits.

"There is no way I can see that we can approve this project under the current General Plan," Planning Commissioner Michelle Plotnik said.

The vote to deny Castle & Cooke's application was 3-2, with commissioners Mike Miller and Ted Allured opposed.

Representatives of a number of environmental and land-use advocacy groups, including Sierra Club, Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, Calaveras Planning Coalition and MyValleySprings.com, were on hand to drive home the point that Sawmill Lake could generate legal woes if it isn't done properly. Many said they believe Castle & Cooke's threatening letter last summer has further delayed completion of a General Plan update. "Please do not allow the General Plan process to be sabotaged and sidetracked," said Colleen Platt of MyValleySprings.com. "The guiding principle is 'plans before projects.' "

Sawmill Lake next will go for a final decision by the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors. Willis estimated it might be on a Board of Supervisors agenda in late January or early February.

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Planners reject Sawmill Lake

Over the summer, the Castle & Cooke development firm threatened to sue to get a quick decision on the 800-home Sawmill Lake project. This week the Planning Commission rejected the project.



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