

News

CALAVERAS SEES MORE GREEN IN FUTURE

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SAN ANDREAS - The "sea of yellow" is on its way out.

Calaveras County officials use that term for areas marked in yellow on planning maps that have long designated huge swaths of the county for future rural housing tracts.

Instead, a new map being created as the county updates its General Plan designates those areas in green and will consider them "resource production" zones to be preserved for forestry, mining, ranching and farming.

The effort to preserve resource lands is linked to a simultaneous effort in the proposed General Plan to steer most future growth into community centers that have the roads, sewers and water utilities to efficiently serve new residents.

The Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission, during a rare joint study session, voiced their approval Tuesday for the map and the general direction of the plan. That informal endorsement is a key step that will now allow staff to begin environmental studies of the new plan, putting them on track to complete it by next year.

County planners have been trying to update the plan since 2006 and have suffered many setbacks as elected leaders gave at times conflicting directions and the Planning Department suffered turnover in both its leadership and the consultants it hired to assist with the plan.

"I think we're moving in the right direction. It looks a lot better than the sea of yellow out there," said Supervisor Chris Wright, whose 2nd Supervisorial District has a high concentration of the lands currently designated for rural residential development.

Under the leadership of Planning Director Rebecca Willis, county planners have made extensive efforts to address the concerns of individual property owners and to explain in detail the costs involved in various policy choices.

This is actually the second draft of the map that changes yellow to green. Brenda Gillarde, the planner overseeing the General Plan update, said that after the first draft was released, the department received 80 requests from property owners for changes in land-use designation. She said planners were able to grant most of those requests.

Willis said that in some cases where requests were denied, it was because granting them would have stuck taxpayers with the cost to do environmental studies for which there is no budgeted funding.

Property owners who are willing to pay for their own studies can always apply for a General Plan amendment.

There are still plenty of issues to resolve. One is a temporary board policy in place since 2007 that has mostly banned agricultural land owners from carving house lots smaller than 40 acres unless those lots have access to sewer and water utilities.

A similar policy proposed for the new General Plan would set a minimum 40-acre lot size for most of the new "sea of green" resource production lands.

Willis asked the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors whether they support the 40-acre minimum or want it set higher or lower. Even with a 40-acre minimum on resource production lands, possible splits and existing lots under the proposed General Plan would provide enough housing sites to allow the county population to swell

to more than 126,000 by 2035, or almost three times the approximately 45,000 residents who live there now.

In contrast, the existing General Plan's sea of yellow rural units would make it possible to have a population of almost 323,000 by 2035.

Planners said this far outstrips likely population growth. They note that the state Department of Finance estimate is that Calaveras County will have a population of 55,541 in 2035.

Still, many rural property owners have hoped that a housing boom would at some point allow them to cash out. Tonja Dausend of Burson, a property rights advocate, said that from her perspective, the proposed General Plan resource land designations were taking away property rights.

"This is just like the government dipping into people's retirement accounts," she said.

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