

RESPECTED CALAVERAS PLANNING DIRECTOR RESIGNS

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

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Record Staff Writer

SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County Planning Director Rebecca Willis has announced she will resign effective Sept. 13.

This week's announcement comes almost exactly two years after Willis took command of the once-battered department. Other government leaders credit her with leading a remarkable turnaround of the department, including clearing a backlog of unresolved development applications and making progress on a long-stalled effort to update the county's General Plan.

Calaveras County Administrative Officer Lori Norton, who has been in her post less than a year, said that people both within county government and outside it have told her Willis is the best planning director the county has ever had.

"Good people are always going to have other opportunities available to them," Norton said.

Willis, reached by phone, confirmed she does have another job lined up. She declined to say where she will be working, except that it will be in city planning.

"Everything in my letter is really true. I've really enjoyed these last two years. It has been one heck of a challenge," Willis said.

Her letter, dated Thursday, praised her colleagues and thanked the county's Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission for supporting her.

Unlike prior planning directors, Willis racked up an impressive record of winning votes. The Board of Supervisors backed her unanimously in March, for example, when she recommended denial of an application by development giant Castle & Cook to build 580 houses in Copperopolis.

And just last week, the Calaveras County Planning Commission unanimously supported her recommendation to deny an application to create some 10-acre house lots amid ranch land on a narrow stretch of Pool Station Road.

Willis points out that those are the only two times she's recommended denial of a contested land-use application during her years in the director position. But they are emblematic of the problems facing a county where past land use decisions have often set up property owners to have expectations they could develop land despite inadequate roads or rules protecting agricultural land.

Willis is the sixth person to serve as the county's top planning official in the past seven years, a reflection of the bitter political struggles that erupted even before the local housing market collapsed in 2008.

Supervisors interviewed Friday said they believed Willis had strong support from the board and that they are sorry to see her go.

"It is a huge loss for us," said Supervisor Darren Spellman, who represents the Rancho Calaveras subdivision near Valley Springs.

Said Debbie Ponte, the supervisor representing Angels Camp and Copperopolis: "I am sorry to see her go. I am just thankful for the time she spent with us."

Supervisor Cliff Edson, who represents San Andreas and Valley Springs, also said he believes he and his colleagues have been supportive of Willis.

Edson, however, has led calls for renewed economic growth in the county. Edson is among those who hope that completion of a long-overdue General Plan revision will facilitate the creation of new businesses and jobs.

Willis is not as optimistic that better planning alone can speed the way to prosperity.

"When it comes down to it, the political expectations and the reality, they just don't match," Willis said. "I think there are expectations of economic prosperity so quickly. I don't know anybody that could do that."

"We have the Toyon industrial park that has been approved for 30 years. It is a site that is ready for development, and development hasn't happened for 30 years," Willis said.

"Approving more residential subdivisions doesn't mean jobs. There are so many residential subdivisions out there approved now that are not going anywhere," Willis said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

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