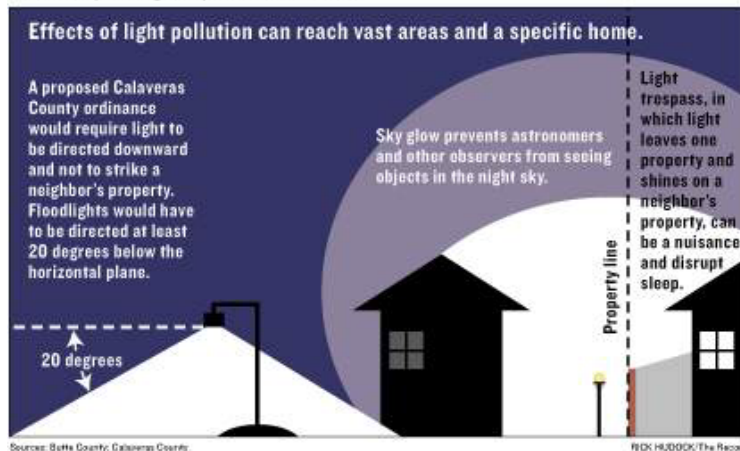


CALAVERAS HEARING TO SHED LIGHT ON CALL FOR ILLUMINATION ORDINANCE

Dark sky in Calaveras?

Calaveras County's Planning Commission is considering a proposed ordinance to limit light pollution. So far the commission is leaning toward making the measures voluntary. Butte County recently adopted a mandatory ordinance to prevent light trespass between residences.



By **Dana M. Nichols**
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Record Staff Writer

ARNOLD - The heavy snowfall that knocked out power to Merita Callaway's neighborhood Dec. 7 reminded her why she's spent the past seven-plus years urging her colleagues on the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors to adopt a dark-sky ordinance.

"I went out, and the stars - it was exquisite. Is that not exciting, to be able to see out there without reflections?" she said.

For the first time since 2002, when Callaway began raising the idea of restricting light pollution, the issue is getting a hearing. The Calaveras County Planning Commission in November reviewed a draft ordinance that would require newly constructed exterior lighting to be directed downward and would bar exterior lighting from trespassing onto a neighbor's property.

The Planning Commission initially balked at the idea of mandatory measures to reduce light pollution and has directed staff to instead consider a voluntary ordinance. Callaway, meanwhile, vows to continue pushing for mandatory restrictions on light pollution when the proposal reaches the Board of Supervisors.

"Since 2002, I have watched the increase in light pollution in Calaveras, and voluntary isn't working," Callaway said.

Astronomers have long advocated for such ordinances. One of the nation's oldest and strongest municipal bans on light pollution - in Tucson, Ariz. - was done to protect the operations of Kitt Peak National Observatory 56 miles southwest of Tucson.

The glow thrown into the sky by light pollution is such a problem that members of the Stockton Astronomical Society often head east on Highway 4 to Calaveras County or up Highway 88 to Amador County to find places to view stars.

"You just can't see the Milky Way anymore from Stockton," said Doug Christensen of the Stockton Astronomical Society.

Christensen said the light-pollution problem has dramatically worsened in his lifetime. In 1955, in contrast, Stockton Astronomical Society founder Dr. Clarence P. Custer took a photo of the Andromeda Galaxy with a telescope inside the city.

"There is no way you could take that photograph now. You would never get any black on the photograph. It would wash it out completely," Christensen said.

While the Milky Way is still visible from many spots in Calaveras County, preserving that view wasn't Callaway's initial motivation for crafting a dark-sky ordinance. Instead, it was complaints from constituents who objected to lights shining onto their property, she said.

That same issue was what prompted the Butte County Board of Supervisors in late October to adopt a lighting ordinance, said Claudia Stuart, principal planner for Butte County.

"Butte County became aware of some situations where there was some truly intrusive light that was coming from residential properties and affecting residential properties," Stuart said. And voluntary efforts failed to resolve the conflicts, she said.

"Those folks had tried to work out some sort of resolution on a voluntary basis and had not been able to accomplish that," Stuart said.

The Butte ordinance goes further than the Calaveras County proposal. In addition to requiring new projects to direct lighting downward and to eliminate light trespass, the ordinance also gives property owners a maximum of six months to adjust, shield or replace light fixtures so they comply with the rule.

After that, a neighbor who no longer wishes to endure obtrusive light can report the problem to county code enforcement officers.

County officials would not, however, go out looking for violators on their own, Stuart said.

"It is really complaint based," she said.

An international movement has grown around the idea of preserving dark skies since Tucson adopted its ordinance in the early 1970s. Jack Sales of Citrus Heights serves as a representative for California for the International Dark-Sky Association.

Sales said that Butte, San Benito and Placer counties have also recently adopted ordinances aimed at reducing light pollution.

"There's a tendency for the rural areas to do it, because they've still got something to preserve," Sales said.

When the Calaveras proposal reaches the Board of Supervisors, Callaway is likely to have at least one ally. Board of Supervisors Chairman Russ Thomas, who represents the Copperopolis area, said the draft Copperopolis Community Plan includes language that would require parking lot lighting and landscape lighting to be directed downward and not spill into the sky.

Thomas said he and other Copperopolis residents are well aware of the glow to the south of that town caused by the unshielded lighting around Sierra Conservation Center, a state prison across the line in Tuolumne County.

"Anywhere around Copperopolis you can look over in that direction and see the lights that are illuminating the night sky," Thomas said. "That's a good example of the kind of lighting I'd like to change."

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On the web

For more information on dark-sky issues, visit the International Dark-Sky Association at www.darksky.org.

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