

NEW RANCHETTE DEVELOPMENT IN CALAVERAS COUNTY MOVES AHEAD

Las Tres Marias subdivision to use wells and septics

A developer is proposing to create a 15-lot housing subdivision on Highway 12. The 5-acre lots would depend on wells and septics despite the desire of county elected leaders to steer development to areas with water and sewer utilities.



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June 23, 2011

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June 23, 2011 12:00 AM

SAN ANDREAS - Las Tres Marias may be one of the last housing subdivisions of its kind in Calaveras County.

The planned development west of Burson on Highway 12 consists of 15 lots, most of them five acres, each to have its own well and septic system.

The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors voted in December 2006 to curb rural sprawl by banning such developments. That ban requires subdivisions creating house lots smaller than 40 acres to connect to municipal water and sewer systems.

Still, the board voted unanimously Tuesday to approve Las Tres Marias. The reason: Developer Luis San Bartolome applied to create the subdivision in 2004, more than two years before the sprawl ban.

"These are the types of developments that are going to get us into trouble as we go forward," Board of Supervisors Chairman Tom Tryon said before the vote.

The problem, say Tryon and many officials, is that ranchette development almost always becomes a burden to taxpayers because it costs more to support with government services than it pays in taxes.

Not everyone agrees with that assessment. Supervisor Gary Tofanelli, whose district includes the development, said county officials should study the psychological and social costs to "compress

people together." He speculated that the crime rate may rise if people move into the area's small towns instead of living on ranchettes.

San Bartolome won praise from many county leaders for modifications he made to the project to address concerns ranging from traffic to endangered species.

Among other things, San Bartolome redrew his lots and agreed to limit home construction to specified areas within the lots in order to ensure that the endangered California tiger salamander would be able to find safe passages through the project.

"This gentleman has done just about anything anyone has asked him to do," Tofanelli said.

The studies on environmental issues caused years of delays for San Bartolome. Supervisor Steve Wilensky apologized for that, noting that if Calaveras had created a countywide habitat plan, then small developers such as San Bartolome would more quickly be able to resolve environmental concerns.

Currently, federal and state agencies force virtually every project in western Calaveras County to do individual habitat studies. That's because the area is home to a number of species on state and federal watch lists, including the tiger salamander, the red-legged frog and the elderberry longhorn beetle.

With a countywide habitat conservation plan, such studies would be unnecessary and developers would have clear protocols for how to mitigate any habitat issues.

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