

Reconciling rural charm, smart growth

Valley Springs aims to plan community with character

By Dana M. Nichols
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VALLEY SPRINGS - A year ago, the prospects seemed dim that Valley Springs would be able any time soon to plan for a future with fewer traffic jams, more sidewalks, a revived town center and more beautiful neighborhoods.

The facts: Valley Springs' existing community plan was created in 1974 and was hopelessly out of date. County officials said they had no money to update the community plan at the same time that the county is updating its larger General Plan. And suspicious residents prompted county officials to reject a proposal by developers under which developers would have paid to update the community plan.

Now, however, local officials have \$255,810 to fund what they are calling Rural Smart Growth: A Community-Based Plan for Valley Springs. Public workshops will begin in late May, and organizers are planning by summer of 2010 to have a plan - possibly in time to incorporate it into the new Calaveras County General Plan.

"I think we are going to accomplish something," said Muriel Zeller, a Valley Springs poet who played a key role in breaking the stalemate over creating a community plan for Valley Springs.

Zeller did it by sitting down with a representative of the Sacramento-based nonprofit Local Government Commission to write a grant proposal. As a result, the California Department of Transportation gave \$204,648 to fund creation of a plan.

Caltrans' motive: It wants communities such as Valley Springs to plan for adequate collector streets, rather than depending only on state highways for local traffic. Caltrans also wants communities to plan for sidewalks, bike paths and businesses close to homes so people don't always have to use their cars.

The Calaveras County Council of Governments kicked in the rest of the money and provided CCOG staffer Tyler Summersett to manage the project.

The Valley Springs community plan project now has an advisory committee that includes business leaders, land owners, residents and others, as well as a team of consultants that includes Randall Arendt, a top national expert on preserving and improving the charm of small towns as they grow.

Virtually all residents admit Valley Springs needs help.

The historic town center, built in the late 1800s, has languished without the renovations that have boosted the fortunes of historic town centers in Murphys and Angels Camp.

And just across the street from the historic town center are strip shopping centers.

Continue down Highway 26 and residents find subdivisions that look pretty much like most suburban subdivisions built in California in the past 30 years.

Yet the builders who constructed the homes in those subdivisions are often frustrated as well, as the people who buy those homes form community groups that sometimes wage political battles against what they see as misguided growth that is spoiling the area's charm.

Zeller and others with MyValleySprings.com, a group that played a role in winning the Caltrans grant, say they are not anti-growth, but want growth that is planned for the well-being of the entire community.

The community sessions that will be held May 28 through June 2 at Valley Springs Elementary School and the town's Methodist church will begin that work. Summersett and Arendt said they will give residents lots of information, including photos, maps and illustrations, to help them understand the possible paths Valley Springs can take as it develops.

The goal is to come up with plans for reviving the old town center and setting appropriate guidelines for new neighborhoods, even if that requires asking for changes in existing county codes and road standards for the area.

"We don't have the policies that really support it, and we don't make it easy for developers to do good projects," Summersett said of many of the innovative ideas that might be used to create more livable, traditional neighborhoods.

Still, Summersett said he's optimistic that it can be done. "We're hoping this is going to be a model project for rural communities."

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Help plan valley springs

Public meetings to create a community plan for Valley Springs will be held May 28 through June 2 at various locations in town. Exact meeting times and details will be posted at www.calacog.org/vs_cbtp.shtml.