

S.J. COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

LAND-USE HEARINGS COVER WIDE SWATH OF GROUND

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STOCKTON - As officials continue to update the San Joaquin County General Plan, more property owners Tuesday made their pitches to add homes where there is now farmland, put industry where there are homes, add new retail centers or otherwise change how land is used as the county develops over the next two decades.

The hearings will continue next week, when the Board of Supervisors will continue to consider if the proposed changes in land use fit with the updated General Plan. It's the latest step in a years-long process that follows the board setting a working vision and policy goals to take the county into the future.

Requests have ranged from developer-backed proposals that would change hundreds of acres to couples wanting to change just one parcel of land.

And for some, the reasons for wanting a change were deeply personal.

"We want to do this for our son," said Suzanne Homem. Her farming family has owned the roughly 40 acres south of Manteca since the 1930s. There are three homes there: one for her parents, one for her sister and one for her and her own family.

She and husband Dino Homem wanted to change the land-use designation for their 2-acre piece of that parcel from agricultural to rural residential so they could ensure their two sons - one who is developmentally disabled - would be taken care of and have a place to live for the rest of their lives.

The tricky part is that the small parcel is separate from the larger farm for financing purposes. It's something farmers in the county are able to do in order to mortgage a house on their property without having to risk losing the whole farm.

It's a common enough practice that officials were concerned about setting a precedent of going against rules to prevent subdivision of agricultural land for new homes.

"We get people every day who want to subdivide, ... and we have to say no," Community Development Director Kerry Sullivan said.

And on a vote of 3-2, the supervisors denied the request to change the land-use designation. The board denied 11 out of 12 requests Tuesday. It considered dozens at an earlier hearing, and more are coming Tuesday.

Those that get the nod will be included in the General Plan when it undergoes environmental review later this year and could end up in the draft General Plan. Even if the land-use designation is in the final, approved plan, it is not approval for any particular project.

The board had already set goals for the new plan to encourage growth in existing urban centers, preserve farmland and allow commercial development in certain areas along major roadways.

But the board voted down one request from a group of property owners to open designated farmland for a variety of uses north of Interstate 205 near Mountain House. Property owners, lawyers and others lined up on both sides of the discussion, which took up most of the morning of the daylong meeting.

"I think we have heard every conceivable reason for approval or denial," board Chairman Ken Vogel said.

Among those reasons, proponents said the land-use change could bring jobs and shopping on land that has seen its value as farmland diminish from a lack of water and its location in a "donut hole" surrounded by current and planned development.

Opposition focused on the lack of sewer and water services for the project and the impact a change would have on Mountain House. The unincorporated community is still in the early stages of its own master plan, which includes housing, jobs and retail space.

"It's the best-planned community we have in San Joaquin County," Supervisor Steve Bestlarides said. Already, 10,000 residents have bought into the town's master plan, and the proposal could deny them the opportunity to see already-planned-for commercial development within walking and biking distance from their homes, he said. The residents and the developer have more than \$2 billion invested in the community, he said.

Bestlarides was one of four members to vote to deny the proposal. Supervisor Bob Elliott, who represents Tracy and Mountain House, voted to approve it.

There are different fundamental views on the economy, he said. One view is the economy is a zero-sum game where there are only so many pieces of the pie to go around, he said. But another view is that there's a synergy that allows the whole pie to get bigger, he said. "I happen to believe that."

There may be a good reason to deny the proposal, he said. "But I think preventing competition is not one of them."

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