

SHIFT IN GROWTH POLICY SIGNALLED

By **Michael Fitzgerald**

December 18, 2013

Record Staff Writer

December 18, 2013 12:00 AM

Today: the potential death of sprawl.

For decades, Stockton's growth policy was to build on the urban edges. The city sprawled, smothering farmland, decaying from the inside out.

But Stockton's bankruptcy shifted power away from mindlessly pro-growth council members and planners who allowed developers to take over city land-use policy.

One of Stockton's new leaders stood up at last week's meeting of the Planning Commission and announced that in Stockton, the era of sprawl must end.

Community Development Director Steve Chase spoke as the commissioners considered a developer's proposal to build the Bear Creek East subdivision.

Bear Creek East - 2,100 homes on 160 acres at Eight Mile Road - was seen as an important bellwether of land-use policy.

It was the first to be proposed since the real estate collapse, the first under new city leadership. Its fate would signal Stockton's post-bankruptcy growth policy.

The project also was important because it was, despite "smart-growth" window dressing, a truly unbelievable hunk of old-school sprawl.

It was leap-frog development, an island of low-density growth across the fields north of the city. Taxpayers would have paid a pretty penny to extend the city out there.

Approving it probably would have broken the General Plan Settlement Agreement, a legally binding city commitment to densify, likely triggering a lawsuit.

Anyway, Chase, the new community development director, spoke before the commission voted.

"Really it comes down to the bones of the community," Chase said, "its heart and soul, its character."

Yet the city has - wait for it - approved about 40,000 more housing units at all four corners. Around 23,000 are "entitled," meaning the property owners have the right to build them, and may once the market heats up.

The others units are on the books as applications: By one measure, enough housing for the next 63 years of city growth, Chase said.

And oh yes, over 400 Stockton houses stand boarded up, a ghost town within a town.

I don't know about you, but I find the idea that Stockton is glutted with housing until 2076, and considering okaying even more, to be - not a planning term - loony.

Chase said he drove across town and was stunned by the leap-frog development that has left a wreckage of vacancies and blight in its wake.

"We're too big for our britches," he said later. "The madness of foreclosure, the effects of the Great Recession, the municipal bankruptcy, all point to the need to trim down and engage in some belt-tightening."

For reasons of community as much as for money, he added. "Whenever we are looking at changing the character of our city, it's incumbent that we don't leave neighborhoods and people of all colors and economic stripes behind."

In other words, this city has long pursued a self-destructive land-use policy, mistaking sprawl for prosperity. It has tragically neglected to judge growth through the lens of what the people of Stockton want this city to be. It handed that role to developers, and we should take it back.

"All arrows ... are pointing towards the adaptive re-use of underutilized and vacant properties in this community," Chase said. "Towards the revitalization of downtown. And towards the revitalization of south-side neighborhoods. And I don't think we can ignore that. I think it's part of the character and self-esteem of the community."

It is not possible to proclaim the death of sprawl. Sprawl is hard-wired for decades to come. The issue was whether to hit the brakes on it or to relapse into gung-ho home-building at its most self-defeating.

The Planning Commission voted 4-3 not to approve Bear Creek East. That signals a shift in city growth policy. Bravo, commissioners. Bravo, Mr. Chase.

Contact columnist Michael Fitzgerald at (209) 546-8270 or michaelf@recordnet.com. Follow him at recordnet.com/fitzgeraldblog and on Twitter @Stocktonopolis.