

PLANNERS, TEA PARTY FIND SELVES ON COMMON GROUND

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SAN ANDREAS - Members of the Calaveras Planning Coalition see themselves as advocates for land use planning principles intended to keep sewage out of rivers, to make sure there are adequate roads and water for homes, and to preserve the beauty and productivity of the county's ranches and forests.

The coalition's critics, in contrast, say they are either dupes of a United Nations conspiracy to control places such as Calaveras County, or willing participants in it.

So it seemed possible that there might be fireworks when the Calaveras Planning Coalition on Monday held a public meeting to explain its goals and history, and an unexpectedly large standing-room-only crowd of 57 people showed up.

Some of those in the audience at the county library included tea party activists and others whose pro-property rights views lead them to be suspicious of advocates for planning.

There were no fireworks. But there was a forthright discussion in which Coalition members denied being part of any conspiracy. And in the end, tea party activists said they share many goals with coalition members, even if they still worry about manipulation by left-leaning groups, such as the Tides Foundation.

"These are good people," tea party activist Peter Racz said at the end of the two-hour meeting in the Calaveras County Public Library. "But they better look at the source of the ideology."

The Calaveras Planning Coalition had its origins in 2005 when Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch, an environmental group, decided to encourage county residents to be more involved in land use decisions. The Community Action Project began offering training and support to a number of existing groups throughout the county.

Those groups, in turn, founded the Calaveras Planning Coalition. The coalition members agree to a list of principles such as "Projects should be approved only if there is adequate water to supply them."

Libertarians and tea party members are suspicious of all this in part because Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch in the past has received funding from the Tides Foundation, and the Tides Foundation has received money from billionaire financier George Soros' Open

Society Foundations, and Soros, even though he's a very successful capitalist, supports leftist causes.

Several Coalition members said during the meeting that they are not part of any United Nations conspiracy, and instead insisted that they began going to meetings and got involved because of things happening in their neighborhoods.

"A city-style subdivision appeared in our area, seemingly almost overnight," said Colleen Platt, a member of MyValleySprings.com. Platt said she wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, and ended up meeting with other people who also wrote letters.

Platt said her group had difficulty getting accurate information on development plans for Valley Springs, and so decided to create their own map listing the location and status of every project.

Tom Infusino, a land use attorney who is the facilitator for the Coalition, explained how various state laws require local governments to plan land use. And he noted that the current Calaveras County General Plan, which is almost two decades old and found to be legally deficient, makes it difficult to bring development projects to the area.

"Many responsible investors are discouraged from investing in Calaveras County altogether," Infusino said.

Infusino said the Coalition will continue to push county officials to be transparent as they work on an overdue revision of the General Plan, which has now been in process for eight years.

That push for transparency and the push to ensure that locals have a say in how their communities develop leaves some common ground for both planning advocates and property-rights advocates to work together, said Tonja Dausend, a tea party member from Burson.

"We have a lot in common," Dausend said. "We also support protecting the environment."

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