

General plan update gets mixed marks

Written by [Margie Hiser](#) April 21, 2010 12:36 pm
The Union Democrat

Land use policy in Calaveras County will guide future development to community centers and the county's western low-lying areas, under a set of general plan update principles approved Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors.

After a marathon session that ran from 9 a.m. to almost 6 p.m. and included nearly four hours of public comment, the board voted unanimously to support a pattern of development that aims to minimize public infrastructure costs and preserve the county's open vistas and agricultural lands by encouraging in-fill development in existing towns and villages.

The chosen development strategy had earned 71 percent of the votes during a series of seven public workshops that were part of the process leading up to Tuesday's meeting.

The vote also directed staff to assume a 1.4 percent growth rate in most of the upper-elevation eastern areas of the county and a 2 percent rate in the lower-elevation — and historically faster growing — western communities like Valley Springs and Copperopolis.

"I would rather plan for additional growth than have additional growth come and we didn't plan for it," said Supervisor Tom Tryon prior to the vote.

The hybrid solution blended a baseline growth rate used in two of the alternatives presented during the workshops, with a higher rate that was used in the other alternative the workshops offered.

"One size does not fit all in this county," said Supervisor Gary Tofanelli repeatedly in the debate leading up to the vote.

The direction marks a sweeping change for the county, whose existing general plan has led to the conversion of agricultural land into "ranchette" style parcels of one to five acres.

Yet for some areas, it will have no effect. Those with a community or special plan, such as Rancho Calaveras, will be guided by that document instead, Planning Director George White emphasized to the audience.

In the hours leading up to the vote, the wide range of opinion did not foreshadow a unanimous verdict.

Numerous speakers invoked the Constitution and its protection of individual property rights in denouncing the three formal options.

Instead, many supported an 'Alternative D' developed by the Calaveras County Taxpayers Association, which advocated compensating property owners for any changes in their land use designation and allowing any usage of each owner's land.

"Having a free market-based solution will eventually become the most effective way of managing property in our county," association member Mike Dausend told the board.

Others bashed the community-focused plan for growth.

"People don't come here to live on top of each other, they came here to get away from that," said Jon Ellis, an Arnold resident and veteran of that town's community planning process.

But amid the criticisms were votes of support for the scheme. A staff and board member from the Calaveras County Water District said selecting Alternative C, which planned for community-focused development and a high growth rate, would protect water rights.

Tom Infusino, of the Calaveras Planning Coalition, said his group had concluded Alternative B, which had the same land use philosophy but a lower population assumption, would serve the county best. John Buckley, of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, and two members from the watchdog group MyValleySprings.com later seconded that view.

In a separate vote, the board voted to preserve the existing map and design which lays out mineral resources in the county. The vote was 4-1, with Supervisor Merita Callaway dissenting.

The board also unanimously approved an extension until May 4 for Valley Springs to come up with a community plan, as currently the community has two draft plans, but no completed plan other than the now decades-old existing one.