

CALAVERAS GRAPPLES WITH PLAN FOR GROWTH, LAND USE

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November 26, 2011

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November 26, 2011 12:00 AM

SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County already has enough vacant lots for houses that potentially could put roofs over the heads of a population of more than 200,000 people, and possibly as many as 400,000, county Planning Director Rebecca Willis said this week.

Willis made her remarks during a Calaveras County Board of Supervisors study session on the effort to revise the county's General Plan. The session is the first significant public meeting on the plan in a year and a half.

Willis said the large number of "buildable" lots is a problem because the county only has enough water, roads, schools and other infrastructure to serve a much smaller population - maybe 80,000. The county has about 46,000 residents.

"We need to make sure we don't have exaggerated capacities," Willis said.

Calaveras County supervisors already are concerned. When they last gave instructions on the General Plan revision in early 2010, the board decided to prepare for continued growth but to steer that growth into existing community centers.

At that time, they said that allowing housing to sprawl across ranch lands imposed a variety of unrealistic burdens on taxpayers - such as maintaining an inefficient road system - and posed other risks, including groundwater depletion and pollution from septic tanks.

But while the board has said it wants to put most new houses where they can connect to municipal sewers and water service, it also faces pressure by residents who see such policies as part of an international conspiracy to undermine property rights.

"This plan still imposes smart growth on the citizens of Calaveras County," said Tonja Dausend, a resident of Valley Springs and a member of the board of the Calaveras County Taxpayers Association

Smart growth is a general term for land-use planning strategies to encourage efficient, compact communities and to preserve open space and food production lands. Some critics see it as a United Nations-driven effort to undermine property rights.

Some of the smart-growth strategies proposed for the update include allowing the owners of large properties to transfer or cluster housing density credits.

For example, under current county zoning, the owner of a 2,000-acre ranch could typically divide it into 50 lots of 40 acres each. They could then be sold to a new owner who could build a house on it. Clustering would allow the rancher to instead put 50 smaller lots - say a half acre each - on one corner of the property and preserve the remaining 1,975 acres as a working ranch.

Planners like such clustering because it allows efficient road and utility systems. Large property owners like it because it gives them a way to get cash by selling some housing lots but still preserve the family ranch.

"We want to be as fluid as we can be in those lands," said Mike Dell'Orto, a member of the Ag-Coalition group that proposed clustering and density transfers.

Bob Garamendi, a rancher and member of the Ag-Coalition, said he believes the proposals serve both ranchers and those who want to build rural subdivisions.

"We do not want to infringe on anybody's rights," Garamendi said.

In the end, two supervisors - Darren Spellman and Gary Tofanelli - said they had doubts about density transfers and clustering. Still, a board majority asked staff to include those options in the final plan.

The board was unanimous in its support for a variety of other efforts to refine the General Plan, including further research to determine exactly how many of the vacant lots in the county could actually provide a viable location for home construction.

Willis is scheduled to hold another General Plan workshop with the board Dec. 13 and then present a proposed land-use map in January.

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