

Willis begins new job amid frog controversy

By Dana Nichols/ Stockton Record/ 8-1-11

SAN ANDREAS- Rebecca Willis didn't know that frogs are controversial in Calaveras County.

But she's finding out, now that she's scheduled to start work today as director of Calaveras County's Planning Department.

Willis included in her resume that she shares her rural property north of Lodi with "a daughter in high school, two farm dogs and an unknown number of frogs."

Frogs are a dividing line of sorts in Calaveras County because of the endangered red-legged frog. Local folklore abounds with stories of sinister environmentalists planting red-legged frogs to frustrate the development dreams of ranchers, or zealous ranchers poisoning frog ponds to make sure biologists won't find the critters.

And then there's the annual Jumping Frog Jubilee, a contest central to the identity of the Calaveras County Fair. American bullfrogs- a species introduced to the Mother Lode after the Gold Rush- are used.

The modern frog-jump contest was inspired by a work of fiction written by Mark Twain and set in Angels Camp. In the story, a crafty stranger hustles a local in a bet over how far frogs can jump.

Some of those who advocate protecting the red-legged frog have claimed that the frogs in the story must have been red-legged frogs, then the dominant local species. That outrages property rights advocates, who note that Twain's story is a work of fiction inspired by things he heard from other drunks in an Angel Camp bar. The story never specifies the species of frog.

Willis laughed when asked to explain why she mentioned that she lives with frogs.

"I didn't mean that in any provocative way," Willis said. "The frogs on my property certainly don't have red legs. It certainly wasn't meant to get anybody excited."

Willis, 47, has served the past six years as director of community development for the city of Antioch. The planning director position in Calaveras County has been vacant since January when George White resigned to take a job in Pacifica.

As the new director, Willis will be expected to complete a long-overdue update of the county's General Plan. That effort began in 2006, before the economic downturn, and has sparked heated controversy between advocates for property rights and those who advocate preserving open space and planning more compact, livable communities.

Willis said she was not aware, for example, that the ongoing General Plan revision included a struggle in which a proposed Valley Springs community plan paid for with a \$255,000 Caltrans grant was put on the back burner after property owners objected to efforts to limit sprawl.

“That is one of the areas where I really need to listen to some people and understand the factors involved,” Willis said.

Willis will be the third Calaveras planning director since the General Plan revision began five years ago. But there have actually been at least five people who have led that effort when the directors of the short-lived Community Development Agency are counted. That agency oversaw the Planning and Building departments but were disbanded after protests from the real estate interests and developers who said it unnecessarily slowed their work.

Willis has 20 years of experience in land-use planning. She’s worked in planning and community development departments in communities including West Sacramento, Rancho Cucamonga, San Dimas and Dixon. She earned a bachelor of arts degree in environmental studies from University of California, Santa Cruz.

The Santa Cruz degree and her fondness for activities such as kayaking and mountain biking might make it seem that Willis would be sympathetic to conservation efforts. But Willis assures Calaveras County’s various interest groups that she values both open space and economic development.

“I’ve had experience at both extremes and everything in the middle,” Willis said. “I am excited to come to Calaveras County, and I am really excited to learn what the communities want, what is their vision.”

According to the salary schedule posted on the county’s website, Willis will earn an annual salary of \$99,216.