

Column: From the Editor's Desk by Buzz Eggleston  
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### **A Calaveras moratorium? Bring it on**

“Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Board of Supervisors of the County of Amador, State of California, that said Board does hereby prohibit acceptance of applications for general plan amendments and zone changes ....”

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The word “moratorium” can be a scary thing. It sends shudders through those who make a living in the building industry and among some whose livelihoods are tied to a community's growth.

But to others it's an appealing word for a number of reasons. When people feel that things are out of whack, when government planners are overwhelmed, when elected officials seem to be making decisions without a roadmap, when open space can evaporate before our eyes, when roads are in decay and the money's not there to build or fix them, when water is being trucked in to some places, when ....

It's not surprising that the “M” word emerged during last week's crowded Calaveras County supervisors study session on land use. There's a feeling that if we don't change course parts of our county will mirror what's happened in so many other places, that we'll be overrun by ill-planned growth, and that our sense of wonder at these wooded hills and grassy expanses will become just a memory.

The “M” word arose in Amador County, our northern neighbor, last year. Supervisors there decided that “granting, or denying ... piecemeal General Plan amendments and zone changes is contrary to the public welfare ....”

Calaveras County today embraces piecemeal development, so much so that developers present their plans as done deals. Absence of process has become the process. Amador's situation is not quite the same as ours. The major difference: Amador has five incorporated cities, Calaveras only one. That limits the domain of Amador County's supervisors to the outskirts of developing towns and the rural areas beyond. Town councils still decide what's to happen within their communities.

The upside of that situation is that Amador County's moratorium, if anything, encourages development of “in-fill,” construction in areas where an infrastructure of roads, water and electricity already exists. In Calaveras County's case, developments seem planned willy-nilly, literally emerging from the gray areas of the existing general plan, scattered across the rural landscape like isolated South Sea islands. As more of them emerge, they raise the sea level across the region, creating unpredicted waves of change.

One proposal, it's been pointed out, would bring 1,000 new homes near Valley Springs to land that today's general plan shows as agricultural. Another near Lake Tulloch calls for 253 homes, again on agricultural land. Other mega-developments are mapped in Copperopolis, while smaller ones are scattered across the landscape. If the framers of our general plan thought dense development on these lands was not a good idea, when did that change?

There are lessons we can learn from Amador's experiences, as well as from any of the numerous California counties that also are grappling with growth and development issues, and more specifically with updating outdated general plans.

General plans and the zoning maps that complement them are the key to how people can use land. The two should match and changes to them should be the rare exception, not the rule. The public should have considerable opportunity to shape them.

Amador County, said Pat Blacklock, its administrative officer, has raised application fees to recover the full cost of processing development applications. It's also set mitigation fees, and, to create a fund for the next general plan review a decade or more from now, it has adopted a fee on all new development. Developers should pay full freight, including the cost of offsetting the long-term, cumulative impact of what they plan to build. Otherwise, all of us are subsidizing their profits.

"Thriftiness," Blacklock said, is the key to having the money to do a general plan review. But it sounded to me that it's more like thoughtfulness and thinking ahead. Amador also has mapped a strategy to pay for its present general plan review, which is a three-year process. It budgets what's needed year by year.

"We've been looking at other counties that are doing it to learn what they've learned from it," he said.

Calaveras County should do the same. We are at a crossroads in the county history, without a clear map to the future. The public is growing increasingly alarmed at the scope of the problems we face and more aware of what is at stake.

Many are calling for what is called "smart growth," while some are saying that term is simply a code for stopping all development. It's not.

"Smart growth is development that serves the economy, the community, and the environment. It changes the terms of the development debate away from the traditional growth/no growth question to 'how and where should new development be accommodated,'" the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says.

Calaveras needs smart growth, it needs a new general plan, and it needs a moratorium now.

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