

A new day dawns in Calaveras County

From the Editor's Desk by Buzz Eggleston
Published 12/12/06, The Calaveras Enterprise

Kudos to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors. Last week they tapped the brakes on runaway development.

It took guts.

The teeth gnashing among a few in the real estate and development industries is understandable. But it shouldn't be overstated. Building won't come to a stop. Builders will continue projects consistent with the existing General Plan on land zoned for development. There are literally thousands of such parcels in the county.

It's only if developers want to change the rules that they will face a delay, and there's nothing wrong with that.

The real credit for the supervisors' decision, though, belongs to the people. The board was stuck in a rut, had been for a long time. The people stood up, spoke out.

In large numbers at intervals over the course of 2006, they went to the supervisors and said the status quo isn't good enough. They demanded change. They will have to continue doing that for many months to come as the county forges a new general plan.

For too long now, the county has allowed development a free run without knowing the true costs. Developers have expected, and gotten, approvals for virtually any project they proposed. Some didn't even seek permits. Others simply drew up elaborate plans. One announced on a billboard placed on Highway 26 that a new shopping center was coming. He hadn't filed a single document with county planners.

The burdens associated with development decisions – strained fire protection, beleaguered law enforcement and justice systems, traffic and deteriorating roads, school deficits, and the loss of natural resources – are often poorly understood. They are passed on to future taxpayers, to future residents and to all who will come after us to this place we so cherish.

One example alone ought to suffice: the goofy intersection of Highways 12 and 26 in Valley Springs, where something better should be built before any major new development takes place. And wherever you look in this county there are other neglected needs, such as a dilapidated county jail that routinely spews miscreants back onto our streets before they have served their sentences.

The fact that there are a reported 150 zoning change applications in the pipeline right now tells us that, despite lamentations of a cold winter in the development trade, there's still an awful lot going on up here that wasn't foreseen by earlier planners.

It also illuminates what a consultant told the county this past fall, that the existing General Plan is a blank sheet: It "does not meet statutory requirements and is of limited usefulness as a guide for day-to-day decision making concerning land use, development, and public protection."

That one line acknowledged that the county was operating on piecemeal, seat-of-the-pants policies. It served to warn public officials that staying on that course could have legal implications, in the worse case a complete court-ordered shutdown of development, something no one wants.

Last week the board did the right thing. Supervisors decided to limit General Plan and zoning changes for a brief time, just enough so that the air will clear and planners can map a strategy for building a new general plan and commence work on that document. The policy of limiting zoning amendments shouldn't be in place a day longer than is necessary, but not a day less, either. It's a reasonable step with the least imposition on the real estate and development trades.

Even many of the zoning applications that are now in the pipeline may yet be approved. The board granted a grace period for those that can be processed by Dec. 28. And the board's action itself has a sunset of just 45 days, after which supervisors will make any needed adjustments and consider whether they want to extend the policy of limiting applications for another 10 months.

The county has achieved a noteworthy milestone in this decision. It has come about largely to the credit of its new community development director, Stephanie Moreno, and to the wisdom of other county leaders. But more than that, it's you, the people of Calaveras County, who spoke out and made a difference.

The most important decisions still lie ahead, however, so don't rest on your laurels. Please continue to be outspoken participants in the process of determining the future of Calaveras County.

Contact Buzz Eggleston at gm@calaverasenterprise.com.