

## CALAVERAS COUNTY MAPS OUT DETAILS, TAKES INVENTORY OF LAND

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SAN ANDREAS - Just before the Christmas holiday weekend, Calaveras County Planning Department staff posted online a series of documents that describe the condition of the county's towns, forests, rivers and ranches.

Those documents, formally known as the "setting section" for a long-awaited update to the county's General Plan, are a historic milestone of sorts. Especially if they are accurate.

A previous attempt in 2007 to establish a "base line" map of existing development and land use was so wildly inaccurate that it contributed to the collapse of efforts to update the General Plan.

### ON THE WEB

See documents describing existing reality on the ground in Calaveras County online at [co.calaveras.ca.us/cc/Departments/PlanningDepartment/GeneralPlanUpdate.aspx](http://co.calaveras.ca.us/cc/Departments/PlanningDepartment/GeneralPlanUpdate.aspx).

Now, more than five years later and under completely different leadership, the effort to establish reality on the ground is going much better, say experts who are close observers of the process.

"They are doing better," said Joyce Techel, a business owner in the Valley Springs area and a longtime activist on land-use issues.

That, in part, is thanks to better maps. The maps for the 2007 base line were so inaccurate that media reporters and other observers quickly found multiple locations where houses existed on spots that the maps marked as barren land.

This time, a cursory check of maps prepared in 2011 found no examples of misidentified parcels.

The lack of accurate information on the number of houses and the amount of open space in the county has for years frustrated developers and environmentalists alike.

The proposed 800-home Sawmill Lake project near Copperopolis was the most recent to fall victim to the lack of planning and information. In December, the Planning Commission voted to deny the project application in part because the county had no comprehensive way to evaluate its impact on the environment.

Whether the new setting section goes far enough to detail existing conditions is an open question. Because of the holidays, a number of land-use activists on Wednesday said they were just now taking their first look at it.

"I just cracked the document about an hour ago," said Colleen Platt, a member of the MyValleySprings.com advocacy group.

Among other things, those who waded through the documents will find that more than a quarter of the land area in Calaveras County is designated for housing tracts with 5-acre lots.

If all those 5-acre lots were ever actually carved up and built on, it would mean more than 35,000 additional homes. Brenda Gillarde, the county's General Plan coordinator, acknowledged the total supply of potential home lots far outstrips the potential demand for the next half-century under even the most extreme estimated population growth rates.

Calaveras County has about 45,000 residents, and the population has actually been shrinking in the past few years. Right now, there are about 10,000 5-acre and smaller lots that have not yet had homes built on them, Gillarde said.

Several key sections of the base line report are not yet done. Gillarde said work is under way to complete sections on biological resources, traffic and noise.

The biological resources section, for example, would spell out how much the county has of various habitats, such as oak woodlands. That, in turn, would make it possible to accurately calculate how much of a particular habitat would be lost to a project like Sawmill Lake.

"We want to preserve those oak woodland areas, because they are so rich," Gillarde said.

An initial reading of the sections that are complete did find at least one area of likely controversy. The section on greenhouse gas emissions concludes that the "global" nature of the problem makes it a "challenge" for local governments to analyze.

According to the California Attorney General's Office, however, guidelines set in 2009 require county general plans to quantify the amount of existing emissions and set targets for reducing them.

When asked about this, Gillarde said, "I have not read the latest on how you evaluate emissions in a general plan EIR."

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