

Diversity a good thing for communities

Kristine Williams | Posted: Tuesday, March 27, 2012 9:23 am

As I drive down Highway 26 I can feel a familiar excitement creep over me. The oak trees are beginning to bud; the daffodils in my mother's garden are bright and impossibly yellow. The oranges are heavy on their branches and the wildflowers are beginning to bloom. Beautiful clusters of purple lupins, orange poppies, and gold mustard dot the highway. The extraordinary range of biodiversity in Calaveras County welcomes me home for a weekend visit at my parents' house, situated high up on a hill in Valley Springs.

Unfortunately, this abundance of diversity seems to start and end with the county's plant life. Other aspects of Calaveras, political leanings and ethnicity for instance, are strikingly homogenous. As I stand in the checkout line at the local grocery store I'm struck by how little the inhabitants of our small county resemble the cherished variability of our external environment. A quick look at 2011 Calaveras census demographics confirms my observation. Nearly 89 percent of residents are white, a total of 4 percent are foreign born, less than 4 percent occupy any type of multi-unit housing, and less than 7 percent speak a second language. The last Democratic presidential candidate to receive a majority of votes from Calaveras County was Lyndon Johnson, nearly 50 years ago in 1964. The list of monochromatic statistics continues on and on.

I am reminded of Bill Bishop's book "The Big Sort," excerpts of which I read for a current course I'm taking while away at college. Bishop asserts that over the past 30 years Americans have engaged in a type of "self-segregation." As a country we have increasingly sorted ourselves according to our values, political ideologies, faith, and economic standing. We are unconsciously clustering in communities of like-mindedness, reinforcing the overwhelming political polarization we claim to find so distasteful. Calaveras County is no exception.

In early 2010 I attended community meetings surrounding the topic of including Rancho Calaveras within the Valley Springs Community Plan. Being 19 years old at the time, and having just decided to pursue the study of urban planning, I was excited to attend what I understood to be an informative meeting. Instead I stumbled into the messy arena of local politics and discovered the difficulty of presenting a community plan designed to meet the needs of a "diverse" citizenry. In truth it seemed that my fellow Rancho Calaveras neighbors were extremely opposed to diversifying our community. The term "Smart Growth" initiated whispers of "socialism." Citizens expressed concern of lower-income and minority groups bringing their big-city problems with them. The rhetoric intensified and the argument became increasingly one-sided. Any individual attempting opposition was immediately condemned, ostracized, and discarded.

Now I was, and still am, aware that my personal opinions concerning the subject were aligned with the minority. It is my belief that community plans are meant to guide us in shaping our urban character. We are essentially designing our space and, in turn, creating the concept of place. I am in favor of constructing the built environment to be conducive toward alternative modes of transportation, of providing infrastructure supporting the establishment of safe walking routes, of diversifying our housing stock to incorporate more multi-unit and affordable structures, and of many other ideas that fall under the umbrella of terms such as "smart growth" and "livability." Unfortunately this perspective, and many others, was crushed against the monolithic opinion of the rest of the community. As Bishop states, "... the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogenous groups."

Biodiversity is one of the key factors in evaluating environmental health. The same is true for our community. As I sat in the audience during the final voting session during the Rancho – Valley Springs debates there was a period for public comment. As citizen after citizen stepped before the microphone in the Valley Springs Elementary School cafeteria to espouse the same opinion, I realized that I too needed to step forward. Heart pounding in my throat, I took my place in line, stared out across the sea of angry eyes, and voiced my support for a community that offered affordable housing; for a community that offered a mixed-used retail district; for a community that would allow me to choose between my bike or my car; in essence for a community that provided me with a diversity of choices. As our county begins the laborious process of updating our general plan I hope we heed Bishop's words, "It would be a dull country, of course, if every place were like every other Differences are vital not only for the nation's democratic health, but they are also essential for economic growth. Monocultures die."

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http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_a40a28e6-7828-11e1-a894-001871e3ce6c.html