

Take a Lode Off: Let's keep it rural

By Muriel Zeller | Posted: Friday, April 3, 2015 6:00 am

About eight years ago, early in the general plan update process, there were meetings throughout Calaveras County to determine what local residents envisioned for the futures of their communities. During those meetings, citizens named the preservation of rural character as their No. 1 priority, seemingly without regard to political affiliation or philosophy.

The expressed desire to preserve rural character has generally been interpreted by the Planning Department to mean that we want community-centered development that protects open space amenities while maintaining our distinct noncontiguous communities. In other words, we want to prevent sprawling development into the open landscapes surrounding our small towns. I certainly understand that interpretation, because I don't know how we are to preserve rural character and the quality of rural life without open space and small towns.

Yet, some citizens have protested that the General Plan and land-use regulation are "planning for other people's property." They believe property rights are sacrosanct, even though the Supreme Court upheld the legitimacy of local land-use regulation in 1926. So, do we want to preserve our rural environment or do we want to allow development that sprawls across the landscape in response to so-called "market-driven" demands? I don't think we can have both.

A critical problem with residential development is that it does not pay for itself. Cost of community services studies conducted in 151 communities across the U.S. by the American Farmland Trust "over the last 20 years show working lands generate more public revenues than they receive back in public services. Their impact on community coffers is similar to that of other commercial and industrial land uses. On average, because residential land uses do not cover their costs, they must be subsidized by other community land uses. Converting agricultural land to residential land use should not be seen as a way to balance local budgets."

The studies found that the median cost per dollar of revenue raised to provide public services to different land uses was as follows: commercial and industrial \$.29; working and open land \$.35; and residential \$1.16.

I'm not averse to developers making a profit, but I don't want to be left to make up the shortfall for the cost of services to the homes they build. I'm not suggesting that we quit building homes in Calaveras County, but I think we would be wise not to create additional residential parcels in the new general plan. As John Buckley of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center noted in a recent Enterprise editorial, "... the county already has over 25,000 unimproved parcels now," which is "five times as many parcels" as population predictions indicate we will need in the next 20 years. So why

would we want to create more residential parcels, especially since so many of the unbuilt parcels are in subdivisions with existing infrastructure?

I support economic development. I just don't think it should be predicated upon growing the population to attract retail development. The draft Agriculture, Forestry and Mineral Element prepared by the Calaveras Agriculture Coalition reminds us of the importance of resource production lands, "Resource production operations are a major contributor to the economic engine of the county. This economic fact goes well beyond the sale of food, fiber and minerals. These resource production lands are, in large part, responsible for the growth of tourism and the resulting restaurants, lodgings and stores."

In addition, we currently have two supervisors, Cliff Edson and Chris Wright, who are advocating economic development strategies based upon our natural resources. Edson sought and received support from the Board of Supervisors for his proposed Calaveras Watershed Management Pilot Project, which, according to a letter by Edson, "seeks to build a collaborative planning platform to develop best practices and market-based incentives and approaches to watershed management."

While the premise of the program, which is to increase water yield and reduce catastrophic wildfires, needs further scientific investigation, Edson envisions an industry growing up around the management of our watersheds and even anticipates that downstream water users like East Bay Municipal Utility District and Stockton East Water District will be willing to pay for such ecosystem services.

Wright is advocating for the creation of the Sierra Nevada Protection and Restoration Act. In an Enterprise column, Wright called for more active management of our resources to provide for a sustainable economy, but cautioned such management needs to be balanced with preservation. "We also need to protect more of our scenic resources through expansion of national parks, wilderness and wild and scenic rivers!" he wrote. Wright got to the heart of our conflict, "We cannot waste another 100 years fighting over protection or wise use. We need both." In short, let us capitalize on our indigenous assets, but we don't need to become something less than rural to thrive.

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http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_b02527d6-d985-11e4-912d-679f7cfaaa38.html