

# The right to differ doesn't equal a right to mislead or ignore facts

By John Buckley | Posted: Tuesday, April 14, 2015

On March 10, Ken Johnson's column ran under a headline claiming "Large development benefits Calaveras County and should be allowed by the new general plan." As the target of his opinion piece, I can fully accept Johnson defending development because in a democracy, allowing different points of view is an essential right. But Johnson based his attacks on my Feb. 27 opinion piece by completely twisting my statements and by literally making up fabricated claims.

As examples, Johnson claimed that I oppose developers making a profit, that I want Calaveras County to be a drive-through park, and that our center desires housing only to be built on scattered parcels in remote areas of the county. None of those claims are even remotely true.

In my guest opinion, I pointed out that Calaveras County currently has more than 25,000 existing undeveloped parcels that can be built on to meet the demand estimated by the state Department of Finance. That state agency predicts that 8,908 additional residents may exist in Calaveras County in 20 years. The general plan update states that 3,700 to 5,684 new residential units will be needed to meet that demand. I wrote that with 25,000 existing vacant parcels in the county, developers who want to provide housing already have a vast number of available lots to build on to meet that demand.

Johnson responded with an unsupported claim that the majority of the 25,000 vacant existing parcels are unlikely to ever be built upon. Where is there any evidence to back up such a claim?

Parcels are built on when market conditions are right. Some parcels may obviously never be developed, but if even half of existing parcels are built out, they can provide for more than 40 years' worth of predicted demand, far more than is needed in the current general plan update. Bay Area or Central Valley residents who own Calaveras County parcels will likely wait to build their homes until near the time they retire. Small-scale speculative developers will wait to market their existing lots until the economy is rising. To suggest even more vacant lots are somehow needed to add to the existing inventory defies logic.

Johnson dismissed the existing vacant parcel glut and instead chose to make personal attacks against me and to defend developers. He snidely asked if I have ever been to Saddle Creek or the Copperopolis Town Square projects. In reality, I visited both sites long before they were developed and have revisited both areas on numerous occasions, sometimes meeting directly with Castle and Cooke representatives. I certainly understand the profit motives of large development companies that desire to take agricultural

property and convert it into lots that can be profitably marketed. Our environmental center opposes neither free enterprise nor the ability for developers to make money.

But our center does believe that Calaveras County's new revised general plan should protect important regional values that represent key reasons why residents choose to live in the county. Retaining Calaveras County's rural oak-studded landscapes and extensive areas of ranching and agriculture is not important only for protecting the county's rural character. The scenic values also directly benefit tourism. Many of our members in Calaveras County have strongly affirmed their desire to balance growth and development with protection of rural values. That is called middle ground.

Johnson staunchly defended Castle and Cooke and new massive development projects as desirable from his perspective. In reality, slicing up undeveloped land into more vacant lots has little potential to benefit the vast majority of Calaveras County residents. But there can be obvious benefits if developers build new commercial enterprises or new homes on existing vacant parcels rather than sprawling out further into rural properties. Developers can also benefit the county's economy by creating additional tourist destinations that can bring revenues to the county without over-stretching limited county services.

Calaveras County has a huge opportunity in the general plan update to promote middle ground policies that retain rural values while positioning the county to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Our nonprofit center recognizes that county objectives over the next two decades should include new development, new residential construction and expanded business opportunities. With so many thousands of existing vacant parcels available for those demands, the county certainly doesn't need to sacrifice agriculture, open space and rural values in order to achieve those middle ground outcomes.

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