

# Lack of responsiveness at General Plan Update hearings

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## Guest Column

by Tom Infusino

The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors on July 31 unanimously directed staff to prepare the paperwork needed for the Board to adopt the updated General Plan. The Board's direction concluded a two-day review of the General Plan's ten elements. The updated General Plan will rescind the existing community plans for Valley Springs, Arnold, Avery/Hathaway Pines, and Murphys/Douglas Flat. Fourteen of the county's 24 Community Areas do not have community plans in the updated General Plan.

The Calaveras Planning Coalition (CPC) supports public participation in land use decisions. Unfortunately, the Board's General Plan review hearing was characterized by a lack of responsiveness to both public and Supervisor concerns. It was paced and conducted more like a calf-roping than a public hearing. Public comment was limited to three minutes on each element, which forced speakers to condense and, consequently, minimize multiple complex land use and public policy issues. During the hearing, the both County staff and the Board regularly ignored valid concerns raised by the public.

The three minute time limit even jeopardized individual property rights, as Dianne Kindermann, an attorney representing a local landowner, was cut off in mid-speech.

There were also many items of concern to District Four Supervisor Dennis Mills, but they were only discussed in detail if two other supervisors agreed. In this fashion, the genuine concerns of people regarding a plan that will affect the county for decades were rapidly roped, tied, and left in the dust.

The gallop through the plan was led by District Two Supervisor Jack Garamendi, Chairman of the Board, who indicated during his July 30 introductory remarks that he wanted to move forward with the General Plan Update as quickly as possible, favoring progress over perfection. It is not progress to trade one deficient plan for another deficient plan. That is simply spinning your wheels.

Throughout the hearing when other supervisors identified problems with the plan that would take time for discussion, Garamendi encouraged them to move on, reminding them that the Board would have the opportunity to fix this plan four times a year. This ignores the fact that this General Plan Update was supposed to be the fix for the 1996 General Plan. Why should we settle for a fix that is still broken?

On the occasions when actual policy debate was allowed, a couple of positive changes were made to the plan. The Land Use Element was modified to ensure that all new Specific Plan developments will include public access to recreational assets, open space, a diverse range of housing types, and measures to protect biological and cultural resources. The Circulation Element was changed to maintain free flowing traffic along Highways 4 and 49.

The hearing concluded Wednesday with a discussion of the Community Plans that were being eliminated by the Board. Members of the CPC read long lists of names of people from multiple communities who signed petitions asking for the retention of the community plans. CPC members held up pictures of some of those people that were captioned with requests like “Plan for Arnold,” “Plan for Murphys,” and “Plan for Copper.”

The CPC seeks to balance the conservation of local agricultural, natural and historic resources, with the need to provide jobs, housing, safety, and services. Since new development in the GPU is focused in the existing communities, the text of the Community Plans is essential to ensure that new growth complies with local standards, and meets local needs.

Muriel Zeller of the CPC reminded supervisors that in 2007, the public was told “to go forth and plan, and we did.” She said Valley Springs has an updated “\$250,000 Community Plan that included unprecedented public outreach and participation.” She spoke of her deep disappointment in the County’s failure to keep its promise and adopt that plan. “Forgive me if I have lost faith in you,” she said.

Colleen Platt of MyValleySprings.com said communities had trusted that their community plans would be included in the General Plan Update. She said the Board had betrayed that trust. She encouraged the Board, “To find the backbone and will... to include all Community Plans in the General Plan.” CPC member Marti Crane asked the Board to fix the updated General Plan in order to deliver the “accountability, commitment, and transparency” asked for by the people.

Also left out of the updated General Plan is a Community Plan for Copperopolis. Ralph Copeland, another CPC member, proclaimed, “The people of Copperopolis have worked hard enough. The people of Copperopolis have waited long enough. Now is the time to include the 2013 Copperopolis Community Plan in the General Plan Update.” He concluded, “The community plan is our voice. Please don’t try to silence our voice.”

Clearly touched by the public comments, District Three Supervisor Merita Callaway nevertheless agreed to the elimination of the community plans in her district, and also designated the communities of Copperopolis and Valley Springs as the first priorities for later inclusion in the General Plan.

Mills acknowledged that a new Community Plan was desperately needed for Copperopolis, because the community was deficient in parks, lake access, and services. He recognized that the plans prepared for Copperopolis in 2005 and 2013 had useful components, but he concluded that yet another plan would have to be drafted before he would consider adopting a Community Plan for Copperopolis.

District One Supervisor Gary Tofanelli struggled for words as he inquired of Planning Director Peter Maurer about the process for yet again updating the Valley Springs Community Plan and securing its environmental review. This would mark the fourth attempt, as two community plan updates were drafted in 2010, and a compromise blending of those plans was completed in 2017.

In fact, Maurer had recommended adoption of a Valley Springs Community Plan in January of 2017. However, Tofanelli had the item removed from the Planning Commission agenda. The Commission did nothing in the ensuing 30 months to advance the plan toward adoption even though during that time the Commission cancelled ten regular meetings for lack of agenda items.

While Board members and staff claimed that adopting plans for Valley Springs and Copperopolis would be a “priority,” they again refused to provide a timeline for adoption. This is in contrast to their other “priority,” completion of the state-mandated greenhouse gas reduction plan. For that priority the Board set 2022 as the deadline for completion.

When it comes to community plans, the Supervisors should have heeded the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, “You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”

*Tom Infusino serves as facilitator for the Calaveras Planning Coalition.*