

Village Life

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Community-based process may be future of planning

Community-based planning is riding into El Dorado County on a wave of residents who want to have a greater impact on how communities are developed — or not developed. It is perhaps a logical outgrowth of the movement that began several years ago with the creation of Save Our County and the Shingle Springs Community Alliance. Both of those groups and Rural Communities United have expanded from single issue and neighborhood entities to more county-wide political efforts.

Rural Communities United recently filed a lawsuit against the county over the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors' Dec. 15, 2015, approval of the Targeted General Plan Amendment and Zoning Ordinance Update.

Citizens for Sensible Growth in El Dorado Hills is suing to halt progress on a 250-unit apartment complex in El Dorado Hills Town Center. Supervisors approved the project more than a year ago despite the opposition of the Planning Commission.

With few exceptions, the groups' motivating features have been resistance to large residential developments approved or are likely to be approved by the Board of Supervisors. Project names have been a who's who in local news and include San Stino, Dixon Ranch, Marble Valley and Lime Rock Valley. "Keeping the county rural" has been a common theme with variations such as preserving areas of historical significance and maintaining lower residential density.

Involvement encouraged

The county is encouraging residents with neighborhood and area-specific concerns to engage in a more formal process of community planning. Toward that goal the Community Development Agency developed a 20-page Community Planning Guide that was published in November 2014.

The Community Economic Development Advisory Committee prepared a draft "road map" in 2013 that heavily informed the final planning guide. Prior to becoming District 4 Supervisor, Michael Ranalli played an ongoing role in that committee. He provided the draft road map and a copy of the Community Planning Guide during an interview at the Mountain Democrat earlier this month.

Ranalli described community planning along the lines generally recommended in the planning guide as "an opportunity to participate and collaborate at a really high level and get things done ... Communities that embrace a process are able to do it," he said. "And it's the path to legislative action."

The guide suggests the establishment of an official relationship between the county and residents interested in having a significant voice in how their communities will be developed into the future. The relationship may be temporary to deal with single or simple issues or more formal for communities with complex or multiple issues.

Two basic options exist within the process. The simplest involves residents' efforts to come up with preferred guidelines which they provide to the county's elected leaders for direction. The other creates standards through a "formal and enforceable plan." The former option is essentially complete when the

planning group has submitted adequate documentation and its recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

During the Feb. 9 Board of Supervisors meeting CDA/Long Range Planning Director Dave Defanti provided supervisors with a rough comparison between “guidelines and standards.” If a planning group simply wants one or more guidelines, its relationship with the county might be relatively short-lived and the process might be handled with a series of meetings, Defanti explained. Development of a full community plan which could be as complicated as “a mini-General Plan is a much bigger deal,” he said.

“Standards have to be adhered to,” Defanti quipped, “guidelines (not so much).”

If the option leads to interest in developing a full community plan, a number of legal and procedural issues must be addressed, according to the Community Planning Guide.

First the plans must be consistent with the county’s General Plan and the specific locale’s boundaries must fall within a designated Community Identity area. This step is led by a partnership between the community and the county,” the guide explains.

Planning

“The purpose of a community plan is to implement the General Plan at a local level ... while maintaining and enhancing the character of existing communities with emphasis on the natural setting and built design elements,” the guide continues.

The General Plan is just that; it doesn’t get down to specifics. The community plan on the other hand can actually allow a community planning group to determine what colors and materials are used on buildings or how sidewalks can be customized to suit a particular downtown area.

In order to be consistent with the General Plan, a community plan must include or address at least one of nine General Plan main elements — Land Use, Transportation and Circulation, Housing, Public Services and Utilities, Health, Safety and Noise, Conservation and Open Spaces, Agriculture and Forestry, Parks and Recreation and Economic Development.

“A full Community Plan is an official planning document adopted by the county,” the Guide points out.

As such, its development requires considerable county involvement “with the final stages consisting of highly technical work, led by the county.” The county’s role ensures that the plan complies with all relevant laws and regulations, and adoption allows the county to provide enforcement of the plan.

The guide offers seven planning steps that include strategies for gathering community input and concerns, scheduling and promoting public meetings and setting up a website to keep the public informed of processes and progress.

Step 2 suggests a methodology to “Capture Unique Character” of the community. It poses three questions that should be asked by the planning group: “Where have we been? Who are we now and where should we go as a community? What are our assets?”

The guide calls this the “visioning stage” based on “an in-depth understanding of the short and long-term future the community wants for themselves.”

Director Defanti strongly recommended that the board schedule a community-based planning workshop within the next month or month-and-a-half. Ranalli suggested that one or more workshops be held at night in order to increase public participation.