

# **Brentwood measure to expand urban growth line**

**Robert Selna, San Francisco Chronicle, 6-5-10**

Just as the state is getting ready to set its first targets for cutting carbon emissions related to sprawl, developers in eastern Contra Costa County are battling conservationists over an old-fashioned plan to build single-family homes on agricultural land.

In what is expected to be a close contest on Tuesday, Brentwood residents will vote on Measure F. It asks whether the city, whose population doubled to 52,492 during the past decade, should create a new urban limit line by adding 740 acres to an existing development boundary and locking in zoning for up to 1,300 new homes.

Opponents - including some area residents and open space advocates - say the proposal represents an outdated and wasteful approach to development and contravenes so-called smart growth planning, which discourages driving by concentrating development in urban areas near mass transit and jobs and by planning suburbs more efficiently.

They are concerned that the passage of Measure F could set a precedent for breaking other Bay Area growth boundaries and undermine the goals of the new state climate laws.

SB375 was signed into law in 2008. It is the first effort in the nation to provide financial incentives to build denser housing near transit lines, but it is still being implemented and many details are to be determined. Preliminary regional targets to cut carbon dioxide from cars and trucks are due at the end of the month.

"The situation in Brentwood runs contrary to the conventional wisdom that the most economically and environmentally sound development should be infill and transit oriented," said Jeremy Madsen, executive director of the Greenbelt Alliance, a Bay Area organization focused on preserving open space. "It goes against the idea that there is a market demand for more urban-style living instead of tract homes."

## **Developers' support**

Measure F is sponsored primarily by landowners and developers who own the acreage that would be developed and is supported by four of five Brentwood City Council members. Proponents argue that most of the critics are outsiders and say that the Bay Area's future housing demands cannot be met without adding single-family homes.

Backers of the measure believe there will be a demand for traditional housing in the suburbs in the coming years and have tried to focus the election debate on the local benefits of Measure F, such as money to build roads to two local schools that currently have limited vehicle access, increased tax revenue, development fees and construction jobs.

"The opponents generally are anti-growth and live outside the area and fundamentally don't like Brentwood," said Measure F campaign manager Tom Koch. "They think the only thing that works is stacked flats near BART stations, but that doesn't address all of the Bay Area's housing needs."

While Koch acknowledges that the land in question currently is zoned for agriculture, he said that most of it is fallow, and sits wedged between two growing cities - Brentwood and its neighbor Antioch, just to the north and west.

## **Clash of interests**

Real estate economists say the Brentwood debate highlights the clash between government planning policies and the housing market. If there continues to be a market for single-family suburban homes, someone will attempt to expand urban limit lines to build them, they say.

"When there are market realities about where you can actually make a profit, the strength of the planning ideas and perceived social benefits get tested," said Elizabeth Deakin, a professor of city and regional planning and urban design at UC Berkeley. "Compact development has social benefits that go beyond individual private benefits - driving less and less greenhouse gases - but the market does not provide those; you have to regulate to make that happen."

State policymakers seriously began considering such regulations in the first half of the decade.

SB375 directs metropolitan planning organizations to meet targets set by state air regulators for cutting carbon output related to vehicle miles driven, as opposed to fuel types or other automobile technologies. It recognizes what studies have shown: Increased driving as a result of sprawling development in the coming decades will overwhelm gains from increased vehicle fuel economy.

The law does not prohibit new single-family housing, but it encourages cities, counties and developers to build projects that conform to smart-growth goals. Incentives include help with securing funding, directing payments to developers or planners, and an easier environmental review process for new construction.

The legislation is the land use and planning component of AB32, the 2006 state law that calls for a 25 percent reduction in the state's carbon emissions by 2020, and is the model for national legislation now working its way through Congress.

But the bills' futures are uncertain. A campaign funded largely by Texas oil companies is aimed at getting support for a November ballot measure asking voters to suspend AB32, and Republican gubernatorial front-runner Meg Whitman has said that if elected, she will immediately postpone implementing the law for at least a year.

## **Growth boundaries**

Many Bay Area cities had established urban growth boundaries by the late 1980s, and currently 29 have such limits. Four of the nine Bay Area counties have voter-approved urban limit lines, according to the Greenbelt Alliance. Once established by voters, the lines can only be undone by ballot.

Brentwood's development boundary has fluctuated over the years and has been the subject of previous ballot measures. Currently, it is dictated by a county growth boundary that voters approved in 2006.

Aside from Measure F, another Contra Costa development fight is brewing as developers have proposed a 193-unit housing development on 770 acres east of the county growth limit line near San Ramon and Danville.

Deakin, the Berkeley professor, said she thinks developers will be watching the outcome in Brentwood.

"If the measure passed, it would show that voters are open to more single-family development," Deakin said. "Other people would be really disappointed."