

Rialto planners ignore lessons of unchecked growth

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Many Americans learned first-hand the devastating consequences of the housing-market collapse that rocked the economy and crashed Wall Street. Many now understand that those developers and politicians who once trumpeted growth for growth's sake were cooking up a recipe for disaster.

Not everyone has taken these lessons to heart.

Just ask the good citizens of Rialto, who on June 3 witnessed the local Planning Commission unanimously approve plans for the construction of a mega-subdivision north of the 210 Freeway. The project will sprawl over 2,400 acres of the Lytle Creek floodplain; the expected 8,000 new homes will draw an estimated 25,000 residents to Rialto; added to the mix are big-box malls, schools, and other commercial facilities.

The developer has promised jobs, jobs, and more jobs; the Planning Commission has calculated that this means a sharp uptick in tax revenues. Both swear that this project will be an unalloyed good. If Rancho Cucamonga could grow rapidly; if Fontana could expand quickly, why shouldn't Rialto? Said vice-commissioner Dale Estvander: "It's basically our time."

With that he dismissed the principled concerns of those protesting the commission's hasty, ill-conceived decision. Many are distressed that the massive new suburb will compromise their current quiet, rural life. Those living in nearby Lytle Creek, El Rancho Verde, and Las Colinas - the very names of which evoke the pristine terrain they want to preserve - know that their peace will be forever broken once the bulldozers begin leveling the site for construction.

Others are dumbstruck that the city seems clueless about the project's unstated costs: new roads must be maintained; schools must be funded; public health and safety must be protected. None of these ongoing expenses will be insignificant; guess who will pick up the substantial tab?

Every bit as expensive are the significant environmental factors that the Rialto Planning Commission blissfully ignored. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wrote a detailed analysis of the project's deficient environmental impact statement. It was particularly worried that the project, built within the Lytle Creek floodplain, contains proposals to construct seven miles of new levees to channel streamflow - without indicating how this construction will be maintained; or identifying its impact on the large number of endangered flora and fauna that inhabit this rare and threatened habitat.

So worried was the DFG that it recommended "the City reexamine the project to identify all impacts, prepare a new mitigation proposal to adequately address all impacts, ensure that all cumulative impacts are considered on a local and regional basis, and revise the alternative analysis to include a discussion of the project without the levee."

These unequivocal recommendations should have stopped the Rialto Planning Commission dead in its tracks. Instead, it dismissed DFG's troubling analysis, setting up the distinct possibility that citizens might sue to halt construction for multiple violations of state and federal environmental laws. Such legal actions quickly would turn the city's tax-dollar fantasies into dust.

Why then would the Planning Commission act so precipitously? Why would it appear to listen only to powerful developers? It's simple: in Rialto, like many cities in the America, builders, planners and politicians are essential elements in the growth machine. Together, they dangle before voters alluring promises of new jobs, increased tax revenues, accelerated growth; they expect us to pay gladly so that they might profit handsomely.

Just how bankrupt this scheme can be is revealed in any number of foreclosed subdivisions in Rancho Cucamonga, Fontana, and across the Inland Empire. Before it finalizes its support of the massive Lytle Creek project, Rialto's political leadership ought to consider very carefully the chilling lessons embedded in these vacant streets, empty homes, and blasted dreams.