

What do we do when the well runs dry?

Cathie McHenry and Carol Herrera, Santa Ynez Valley News, 8-25-11

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In 2009, with adoption of the Santa Ynez Valley Community Plan, a communal sigh of relief was heard. The community felt the most important tool controlling our Valley's future for the next 20 years was finalized.

We now had updated, thoughtfully created guidelines addressing the community's principal concerns: impacts of expanding tourism; preserving viability of agriculture; careful development throughout our 72-square-mile geographical area; protection of our local natural resources, including our water supply.

Of prime importance to local citizens is the availability of an adequate and safe water supply. A present land-use issue has brought this concern to the community.

Camp 4 is 1,400 acres, now owned by the Santa Ynez Band of Mission Indians, at the northeast corner of Highways 246 and 154, in the center of the Valley. It is agriculturally zoned, under Williamson Act contract, and within the Santa Ynez Uplands Groundwater Basin.

The Chumash are actively trying to remove this land from the Community Plan — and county or state control — by legislatively annexing it to their reservation through the federal fee-to-trust process. If such a transfer should happen, the impacts are enormous.

The community would be forced to accept the complications of uncontrolled development of the 1,400 acres with no government oversight or Community Plan consideration, while simultaneously losing any property revenues to mitigate the loss.

To take just one example, water. The vast majority of this agriculturally zoned 1,400 acres is used as grazing lands, requiring a small amount of water for the cattle.

In 2005, the Chumash and Fess Parker considered developing a portion of this property into another casino/hotel/golf course. Using mid-range estimates, such a development could use 200 million gallons of water annually. The most likely source of this water is the Santa Ynez Uplands Groundwater Basin.

When asked, local water experts said they would anticipate the Chumash would install very deep wells and be very large water consumers, which presents the very real possibility of compromising other wells using the Upland Basin. Development with no local control over our water supply is too great a risk for our community.

Our water supply must remain within the control and influence of our community.

Attend a Town Hall Meeting, Friday, Aug. 26, at 6 p.m., at the Solvang Veteran's Memorial Hall. Become informed about the federal fee-to-trust process and how our valley land use rules protecting our environment and natural resources could be compromised.