

Sacramento County limits on development criticized

Robert Lewis, Sacramento Bee, 3-10-11

Developers and some Sacramento County supervisors on Wednesday criticized as too restrictive rules proposed for the county general plan to limit suburban sprawl.

They said rules proposed by county planners could hurt the economy and make development too expensive.

They made their arguments against the backdrop of a subtle threat from the state attorney general's office that roughly translated to: Weaken the proposed rules and we'll sue.

These "recommendations or some variation on them should be viewed as a minimum," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Trankley, addressing the board Wednesday afternoon.

The attorney general's office has been monitoring local governments' general plan updates statewide to ensure the plans comply with legislation aimed at combating climate change. The attorney general has shown a willingness to sue over plans the administration believes don't meet the law's requirements.

"If the county chooses to adopt alternative measures, we stress that these measures must be equally effective to those that the staff has proposed to reduce (driving) and greenhouse gas emissions," according to a letter from the attorney general's office to the county dated Monday.

The county has been working on a general plan update for the past several years. Until recently, it proposed opening 20,000 acres of rural land to development. That new growth, however, was based on boom-time population projections.

In October, interim County Executive Steve Szalay suspended hearings on the plan to reconsider the proposed expansion of the Urban Policy Area – the area approved for development. After hiring a consultant to review the plan, the county staff has now recommended keeping the boundaries of the policy area unchanged. Instead the planners have proposed approving expansion of the policy area on a project-by-project basis if the developments can meet a number of criteria.

Criteria include density requirements, proximity to transportation and a mix of uses.

Some developers have chafed at the proposal, calling the criteria too prescriptive and rigid.

"Locking yourself into a box is a dangerous precedent," said Ron Alvarado, one of the principals in the Cordova Hills project – a 2,700-acre development proposed east of Grant Line Road, outside of the current policy area.

John Costa, a spokesman for the Building Industry Association, urged more flexibility to encourage creativity. Costa said the board should also be sure to consider the economy and job growth.

For their part, several supervisors expressed concerns over the current proposal.

Onerous fees and over- regulation could drive the cost of housing up, Supervisor Susan Peters said.

"If our housing prices get too high – the public is mobile. The public will go to Sutter County or San Joaquin

County," Peters said.

Supervisor Phil Serna worried that the county might be sacrificing its vision and character out of fear of litigation.

"I can't help but think we're in an extreme reactive mode tiptoeing around" possible lawsuits, Serna said.

Wednesday's meeting was a workshop and the board took no action. The board is scheduled to continue its hearing on the proposed general plan update at 2:30 p.m. April 13.