

Sacramento supervisors give first OK to 20,000 acres of new growth areas

Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee, 9-21-11

Sacramento County supervisors gave preliminary approval to a plan Tuesday that would open up 20,000 rural acres – roughly the size of Rancho Cordova – to development.

Supervisors endorsed the recommendations of county planners, who sought to balance the requests of environmentalists and developers.

The growth-management plan is being done as part of the county's updating of its general plan, which will direct future development. Supervisors expect to vote on the general plan update by the end of the year.

The growth-management plan has gone through massive changes as large undeveloped tracts, primarily in the eastern part of the county, have become the subject of intense debate in the last seven years.

County planners originally considered opening the land for development, then considered keeping it off-limits, and then reached what they called a compromise: allowing construction in the areas under certain requirements.

"We have achieved the best balance we think we can achieve," said Leighann Moffitt of county planning.

One reason for all the changes: The county has been updating the general plan during a period of major economic swings, as the Sacramento area went through a massive construction boom, followed by the recent slump.

Development and construction interests have consistently pushed the county to weaken proposed requirements for the new growth areas.

On the other hand, the county faced pressure from recent state laws addressing global warming. The state attorney general's office, which has sued San Bernardino County and Stockton over the requirements, has been closely following the county's process.

The county solicited comments from dozens of interest groups and held numerous public meetings on the plan in the last few years.

Under the proposal, developers would have to meet several requirements to build in the new growth areas, which primarily run along Jackson Road, south of Rancho Cordova, and Grant Line Road, west of Rancho Cordova.

Among the requirements: Projects would have to have about 25 percent of their property next to existing urban areas; and they would have to meet requirements for compactness of development.

In addition, developers would have to conduct studies showing that residents of their projects would drive on average no more than 14 miles a day because of compact designs with offices and access to public transit.

John Costa, of the North State Building Industry Association, objected to the requirements.

"We believe there should be guidelines, instead of hard and fast policies and regulations," he told supervisors.

But environmentalists complained that the plan has already become too watered down. They wanted development on the fringes of the county tied to the development of available land in urban areas.

"We think there's too much compromise in the general plan," said Alex Kelter, past president of the Environmental Council of Sacramento.

Supervisor Roberta MacGlashan disagreed, saying the plan has become better through the give-and-take of recent years.

Considering that the plan created unease on both sides, it's probably a good one, Supervisor Jimmie Yee said.