

Allow Elk Grove to expand its sphere of influence

Gary Davis and Jim Cooper, Sacramento Bee, 11-1-13

Davis is the mayor of Elk Grove. Cooper is an Elk Grove City Council member.

On Wednesday, the city of Elk Grove's request to study expanding south of our current city limits, known as a sphere of influence, will be reviewed by the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission.

Not to be confused with annexation, the city's sphere of influence is a planning tool, not a growth or development plan. It certainly recognizes those possibilities, but most importantly, it is an opportunity for comprehensive and long-range planning for Elk Grove and the entire region over the next 25, 50 or even 100 years.

Prior to the city's incorporation in July 2000, Elk Grove was planned as a bedroom community, with far more rooftops than jobs. That's why the city of Elk Grove applied for an expanded sphere of influence in 2008. We need a different kind community – a smart, balanced, sustainable community.

With nearly 160,000 residents and less than 28,000 jobs, Elk Grove residents are forced to pile on Highway 99 or Interstate 5 and commute elsewhere for work. Despite being the second-largest city in Sacramento County, Elk Grove has the worst jobs-to-housing ratio of any city in the region. Even with intense infill development, adequately correcting Elk Grove's existing jobs-housing imbalance is impossible within our current boundaries. That's why the Elk Grove Chamber of Commerce supports the application to ensure job planning complements and improves our business environment.

With proper long-term planning, we can reduce congestion on our freeways, improve air quality and build an Elk Grove that is economically and environmentally healthy.

Although current economic conditions indicate that the city is not expected to grow much in the short term, the city of Elk Grove is looking at planning for the long term, beyond the capacity of our general plan. As the city builds out, it is expected that additional land outside of the city boundaries is necessary to accommodate future growth. In fact, projections from the Sacramento Area Council of Government's Blueprint recognize that beyond 2035, development south of Kammerer Road will be necessary to accommodate regional growth.

The city simply cannot rely on outdated planning to meet our needs through the next half-century. The sphere of influence, as requested, will enable the city of Elk Grove to create a comprehensive, long-term community plan, instead of relying on hasty, piecemeal planning based on market demands and special interests.

To plan for long-term growth projections and ensure local control, Elk Grove needs the opportunity to plan for a community that provides housing for all economic segments, protects the environment and includes open space within its corporate boundaries.

We have been hearing from environmentalists claiming that the city will urbanize every acre. This is simply not true. The city's general plan requires a comprehensive strategy for the preservation of open space, habitat and agriculture, both inside and outside of the existing city limits. As such, the city will incorporate and improve upon open space, habitat and agricultural land uses within the sphere of influence.

In just 13 years of cityhood, Elk Grove has established a strong history of preserving unique rural communities. The nearly 5,000-acre Sheldon area within Elk Grove's city limits still maintains the same agricultural-

residential feel and rural charm as it did decades ago, and the general plan ensures it will not see urbanization in the future.

And when it comes to open space and natural resources protection, Elk Grove has an outstanding track record. The city has been recognized regionally and statewide for its efforts to mitigate and preserve habitat for endangered species such as the Swainson's hawk. The city has gone above and beyond in habitat preservation by acquiring 750 acres and creating hawk habitat for mitigation ahead of development impacts.

We'll continue to be an active and engaged participant in the South Sacramento County Habitat Conservation Plan to ensure the goals of habitat protection are not adversely impacted by the city's plan for future growth. In fact, the sphere of influence application helps bring clarity to this process and establishes a constructive framework for Elk Grove's inclusion in this plan.

The city of Elk Grove has worked hard to improve our community, to protect the environment, preserve our rural communities and plan for the betterment of our region as well as our city. If we aren't able to plan now, we fear the future will bring more of the past.

The city respectfully requests LAFCO's approval of the 8,000-acre sphere of influence request, as submitted on our application, to allow comprehensive long-term planning. We look forward to an open, constructive regional dialogue – with all stakeholders at the planning table – to enhance the sustainability of the Elk Grove community and the rest of the Sacramento region.