

Elk Grove's southward growth plan -- three perspectives

Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee, 3-15-10

The battle surrounding Elk Grove's bid to expand southward by 10,500 acres won't be the last land war.

But for people living in or near the proposed expansion area, the stakes are high:

- For landowners, the current plan to create a mile-wide buffer straddling Eschinger Road threatens to limit what they can do with their property. The buffer would separate urbanized and agriculture areas.
- Environmentalists and Wilton residents south of the Cosumnes River area fear that Elk Grove's expansion into the Cosumnes River floodplain will jeopardize habitat and a legacy of peaceful country living.

The city expansion bid is under review by the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission. Underlying that process are the voices of those in the path of change. Three talked with The Bee on Sunday:

Landowner supports plan

Teri Lawrence and her relatives own close to 450 acres on the west end of the proposed Eschinger Road buffer separating ag and more urban areas.

Some of the land has been in the family for 50 years.

About 200 of those acres straddle Eschinger Road and would fall into the buffer zone. About 70 acres are south of the road. About 130 acres are north of it.

"The transitional land is going to limit what you can do," Lawrence said. Landowners in the proposed zone tend to have large landholdings used mainly for agriculture. Most do not oppose city expansion, she said.

"There are not as many landowners, so our voice is not as large," she added. "The landowners' rights really should come first."

Teri and husband Larry Lawrence were dairy farmers and raised their own crops for food. Now the land is being rented to other farmers.

"Once our property is in the city, our property values will go up a little bit," she said. "But if you ever try to do anything with that property, there's not a lot you can do."

If LAFCO gives a green light, development near the transitional zone "will be years down the road," she said.

"In the long run, I don't know what will happen to the land," she said. "But we would like to have all of our options open."

Similarly, just north of the Cosumnes River, several longtime farming families have said they favor Elk Grove's expansion and believe the city would be a good steward of the land.

Environmentalists opposed

Sean Wirth, chairman of Habitat 2020 representing the Sierra Club, is a resident of Sacramento. But he is a dedicated user of the Cosumnes River preserve, where he kayaks, hikes and monitors wood duck boxes that aid nesting.

Habitat 2020 opposes Elk Grove's application to extend its sphere of influence – or its probable area of future annexation.

Most of the 10,500-acre sphere of influence is not in the floodplain, but the vast majority is critical habitat, Wirth said.

"The animals use the floodplain in an active way. Their health depends on it," he said.

The overall expansion also would affect a vital concentration of nesting and foraging sites for the Swainson's hawk, a threatened species.

This is not the first time the battle has been waged.

In 1993, Sacramento County established the urban services boundary, represented on the south by Elk Grove's current border at Kammerer Road. Farther east, the urban services boundary generally runs parallel to the south side of Grant Line Road.

Many environmentalists view the urban boundary as sacrosanct – the 1993 compromise that was to have marked the final bid to urbanize.

"We pushed hard to maintain a suitable amount of habitat for the animals we share the valley with," Wirth recalled. "The developers wanted to take everything they could. Both sides supposedly compromised. It was supposed to be permanent.

"It's going to be a disaster for habitat if we lose this area."

Last year the Environmental Council of Sacramento, Habitat 2020 and nine other environmental signatories to a May 2009 letter of opposition warned of serious consequences of expansion.

They also sought in the letter to join in the discussion for environmental protections if expansion does go forward.

Of late, that has meant weighing in on a proposed memorandum of understanding between Sacramento County and Elk Grove on a vision and policies for the expansion area.

Wilton resident is wary

Wayne Gallup has lived in Wilton since 1937 and kept 30 acres from the ranch where he was raised. He returned to the land from the Bay Area five years ago. In non-drought years, the olive trees on the land yield a harvest for olive oil.

Most Wilton residents have opposed Elk Grove's expansion.

"Wilton is probably one of the last rural communities left," Gallup said. "We don't have any traffic lights. We don't have gas stations anymore. People look out for each other. It really feels country."

Among the inhabitants, there once was a fondness for Elk Grove. Most long-term Wilton residents went to high school in Elk Grove.

"Since it has become a city, we've just sat here watching what they've done to themselves. There is crime, traffic gridlock, businesses failing, the imploded mall. We don't want to be that.

"It's like they're destroying themselves. They've based their economy on developer money. They have to keep expanding and developing to survive.

"If they get into the floodplain, we have no doubt that there will be development."