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By Mark Lovelace

## **Our Future is at Stake**

The County General Plan Update is an opportunity for us to define our vision for Humboldt County's future. Do we want to preserve our unique local character and quality of life, or do we want to grow into something else? This is not merely a discussion about where new homes will go, but of how much population growth we want to invite. It is a reciprocal process, where the amount of growth we plan for will largely dictate the amount of growth we receive. If we carve out room for 63,000 more people, they will come. In a fast growing state, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the stakes for Humboldt County couldn't be higher.

The County has produced 4 'sketch plans', outlining different concepts for future growth. These include a continuance of the County's existing 1984 Framework General Plan, an 'Expanded Growth' plan which converts more of our resource lands and natural areas to subdivisions, a 'Focused Growth' plan, which protects these open space lands by promoting higher development potential within our existing communities, and a 'Mixed Growth' plan. This last plan offers some improvements over the existing plan, but it would ultimately allow the largest overall increase in population growth.

Recently, a proposal was introduced by a group calling itself HELP (Humboldt Economic and Land Plan), which is backed by real estate and development interests. At the core of the HELP proposal is a four-fold increase in the rate of population growth. The County has projected a growth rate of .5 percent (half of one percent) per year for the next 20 years. HELP wants the County to plan on growth of 2% per year, fully four times as much. Compounded, this calculates out to a population increase of almost 50% in just 20 years, from 130,000 to 193,173. That's over 63,000 more people.

The HELP plan would mean as many as 32,000 new homes added to our landscape (versus the County's current projection of 5,900). The County also projects that only 5,095 of those new homes could be accommodated in our existing cities and sewer areas, leaving nearly 27,000 new homes that would have to be built in rural areas. Using the County's average of 5 acres per dwelling unit in rural areas, the HELP plan would consume 135,000 acres of working open space and resource lands.

*Healthy Humboldt* has a different vision for our future. Healthy Humboldt is a coalition of individuals, business owners, and community and environmental organizations. Our vision centers around preserving Humboldt's unique quality of life, protecting our environment, and strengthening our local economy. Our coalition seeks to maintain Humboldt's rural, 'small town' character, with separate and distinct communities. We seek to preserve the wild and working open spaces which provide both an important part of our economic base and the scenic backdrop for our communities. We envision creating a truly sustainable relationship between our natural environment and our economy.

Healthy Humboldt is working for a County General Plan that will focus new growth into our existing communities, preserve open space, reduce County infrastructure costs, provide certainty and predictability for builders, and maintain our small-town character. This community-centered approach will enhance our neighborhoods, strengthen our local economy, and protect the County's bays, rivers, streams, and natural landscapes.

Healthy Humboldt's Guiding Principles are:

Maintain separate and distinct 'small town' communities with a variety of cultural and recreational amenities, surrounded by wild and working open spaces.

Restore a sustainable relationship with our natural environment to provide for clean water, fish and wildlife, scenic beauty, and natural resources.

Promote housing, education and health care to meet community needs throughout the County.

Reduce County infrastructure costs by channeling new growth to existing cities and communities currently served by water and sewer.

Support locally-based businesses and industries.

Ensure a locally sustainable energy future.

Provide clear and concise County land-use policies for the public.

There is a fundamental difference between planning and reacting. Healthy Humboldt's careful planning approach is to look at the road ahead and ask ourselves "What's our destination, and how do we get there?" The reactionary approach looks at the road ahead and simply asks "How many lanes do we need?"

We can build a future of our own design, but it will take the help and support of Humboldt County's residents. If you share our vision, please join us in working toward a healthy Humboldt County.

Mark Lovelace is the President of the Humboldt Watershed Council. For more information, please check the Healthy Humboldt website at [www.healthyhumboldt.org](http://www.healthyhumboldt.org).