

'Focused Growth' Gains Majority Support in County's Plan Update

The Independent

Tuesday, July 6th

By Daniel Mintz

At the end of a series of public workshops on planning for the county's future development, a majority of people have indicated they want open spaces to be preserved and building to be compressed within existing urban borders.

The six workshops, held between June 22 and June 30 in various areas of the county, took in public comment as two coalitions began lobbying for different goals. Developers are advocating extension of urban limits while conservationists want them to stay where they are so that outlying farm and timber lands can be preserved.

And at a joint meeting of the county's Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors on July 1, the content of 99 surveys filled out by workshop participants were released and show a significant majority in favor of resource preservation and a "proactive approach to conservation of open space."

But debate on how the county should chart its future has become more public with the latest round of meetings, and the two coalitions – the development-friendly Humboldt Economic Land Plan (HELP) and the environmentally-oriented Healthy Humboldt group – are beginning campaigns to sway support. The advent of the coalitions will broaden and intensify the public comment process as each side has begun campaigns to persuade opinion.

Garberville/Redway has been indentified as a potential growth area, and one Redway forest tract owner has expressed concerns over the charting of home development at the borders of his timberland. There was lots of talk about high density "in fill" development of affordable housing within existing urban borders, but that concept has been put in gear at Redway's Orchard Lane intersection – and residents of the neighborhood are fighting the 20-unit affordable housing project proposed there. That situation illustrates the dilemma of fitting high density development into areas where impacts, particularly traffic impacts, can be disruptive.

Sketches of the Future

At the joint meeting, county planners released the survey results and again discussed the four development options or "sketch plans" that update the 1984 General Plan and blueprint building activity over the next 20 years.

The first sketch plan maintains the policies of the 1984 development map. It would continue those policies – which builders say haven't been carried out – and allow some development of outlying areas.

A second sketch plan achieves "expanded growth," substantially through development of one-to-five acre "rural estates" that radiate into undeveloped areas surrounding cities and towns.

Sketch plan three has attracted the most support so far, and proposes "focused growth" within existing urban limits but also allows some extension of development. Of the four options, it provides maximum resource preservation.

A fourth sketch plan is a hybrid, mixing the urban densities of the third plan with the development-accommodating utility service expansions of plan two.

Expanding development and creating its potential in areas that are now used for farming and timber harvesting is probably the most controversial issue the county will deal with. Developers call attention to high housing prices and a shortage of all types of residential units, while land preservationists say that

demand for affordably priced housing is highest and can be best met through “in-fill” – high density building within urban limit lines.

County planners have documented a mounting degree of zoning conversion away from agricultural and timber production. Community Development Director Kirk Girard told supervisors and planning commissioners that large chunks of agricultural and timber harvesting lands have been rezoned for other uses, mostly subdivision for rural residential development.

Since 1964, Girard reported, the rate of zoning conversion targeting farmland has been 3,000 to 5,000 acres per year. From 1985 to 2001, he continued, 60,000 agricultural acres were rezoned for other uses. Similar trends affected timber lands, with lot line adjustments affecting more than 16,000 acres since 1985.

At the same time, housing affordability has dropped. Girard said that in the mid-1980s, 86 percent of county residents making a median income could afford a home. The county’s housing affordability index is now below 30 percent.

Population growth slowed to .5 percent per year between 1990 and 2000, said Girard, compared to the 1.2 percent growth rate seen in the previous decade. And Girard added that the county’s anticipated job growth rate to 2030 is too low to support a higher population expansion.

The meeting was significantly attended by those who advocate for slow, compacted growth. Numerous members of the Institute for Sustainable Forestry recommended clustered development and resource preservation, and many attendees said they favor the “focused growth” of sketch plan three.

Too Close to Timber

During public comment, Richard Dorn, a realtor whose family has owned and managed timberland in Southern Humboldt for over 100 years, said the more expansion-oriented sketch plans allow single-family homes in 40- and 20-acre timber production zones – and he’s “extremely concerned” about it.

“I think that’s going to make our job of managing our property a whole lot more difficult,” Dorn continued. He said that expanded growth planning could put eight homes on one of his property borders, and “when you put a home on 40 acres, they aren’t going to manage their timberland the way I am.”

Dorn added that fire hazards are compounded with each home that’s built near timberland, and water quality issues could arise with the use of septic systems. “Allowing that on timberland is not in the best interest of the timberland or the land surrounding it,” he concluded. “I’m on the boundary of Redway, so I’m going to be severely impacted by it.”

Like many at the meeting, Petrolia resident and activist Ellen Taylor said the third, focused growth plan is most preferable. She added, however, that the goals of Healthy Humboldt Coalition – which were developed by the Humboldt Watershed Council in concert with the North Coast Environmental Center, the Environmental Protection Information Center and the Sierra Club – are what she actually supports.

Taylor also said Petrolians are anticipating that the Pacific Lumber Company will go bankrupt in the near future and are worried that the company’s timberlands will be subdivided. The combination of new development and previously-logged lands “can’t help but destroy and cause erosion and fill in the river.”

She also emphasized a desire for development within urban borders that promotes community atmosphere and encourages walking and bicycling over use of cars.

A resident of an area bordering Arcata encouraged affordable rental development while noting its controversial aspects. “In your Redway situation,” he continued, referring to the multi-family development at Orchard Lane, “you know what communities do when affordable housing for people of modest means

goes in.” He advised supervisors to “take a strong position to support that kind of housing” but added that the cities of Arcata and Eureka “are in-filled enough.”

Roads to Development

But economic and residential expansion is proposed in a plan drafted by HELP, and Bob Higgons of the Northern California Association of Home Builders said that the county needs to support that by providing infrastructure.

“The largest constraint to any kind of development, be it commercial, industrial or residential, is going to be infrastructure,” Higgons continued. He added that particular attention needs to be paid to expansion of the county’s road network.

“We want to encourage, as the General Plan update continues, that the roads discussion comes up as a priority,” said Higgons, who identified lack of road access as “perhaps the most constricting element in the life of this plan.”

Higgons mentioned HELP’s 40-page planning document, which has been submitted to supervisors and other public agencies, and said his group wants county officials “to track the infrastructure issue.”

The HELP plan names Redway as one of several county areas that could benefit from development activity.

Dianne Ryerson, who actively discourages extension of existing development boundaries, is a member of the Sierra Club and the Healthy Humboldt Coalition. She said that support for the focused growth plan suggests that a fifth option should be introduced – one that freezes urban limit lines.

“Since the public is indicating that they really like sketch plan three because it’s identified as focused growth and the one that’s least restrictive in terms of loss of resource lands, then maybe it would be advantageous to provide another alternative that says, ‘Let’s look at in-fill only, let’s not have any conversion of lands,’” Ryerson said. “That’s the direction the public is indicating it would like to go.”

HELP, however, has already challenged the results of earlier surveys to that effect, saying that they don’t accurately represent community opinion. And while it would seem that the HELP coalition’s presentations to public agencies asking for support, signatures on petitions and participation in letter-writing campaigns spells politicization of the general plan process, attendees of the meeting accented the potential for consensus.

“All Agreeing”

McKinleyville Realtor Art Nelleson criticized an Independent news report on the dueling coalitions as “sensationalism.”

“(The) portrayal of this issue was one of a ‘lobbying war’ between the developers and the no-growthers,” Nelleson said. “I don’t know where (the reporter) got this, quite frankly.” He added that everyone basically agrees that the county should grow in ways that maintain quality of life, and specified that he generally agreed with most of Ryerson’s comments even though he’s a realtor.

In its literature, The HELP coalition also voices a commitment to “protection of natural resources.”

After suggesting maximum in fill densities of more than 16 units per acre, former county planning director and current Arcata Planning Director Tom Conlon said that “the most stunning part of this evening is finding myself – and I hate to single people out, but this is just too classic – Dianne Ryerson and Art Nelleson all agreeing that we want to work together to see a product for our community that will protect resource lands and provide maximum housing opportunities.”

Supervisor John Woolley followed up on that sentiment, and he thanked the two coalitions for forming. He said each has “a lot of similarities, and that’s really tremendous for a county that is as diverse as Humboldt – that will be really helpful to having a healthy, healing type of community.”

Woolley prefaced the comments by noting majority support for the third, focused growth plan and he directed staff to “spend some time focusing on that sketch plan.”

Another joint meeting, this one allowing groups and organizations to comment, will be held August 25. At a third joint meeting on Sept. 13, supervisors and planning commissioners will indicate their sketch plan preferences.

The drafting of a plan update and environmental review – the phase that will crystallize the county’s blueprint and its impacts – is scheduled to start this fall and last a year. The following year will involve the drafting of implementation ordinances for an adopted plan.

Note: This article also ran in the McKinleyville Press