

MEGADEVELOPMENT VS “WILDCAT” CURRENT ZONING ---- Sherry Sass (10/07)

There has been a continuing discussion in the local papers about Santa Cruz County development which, I believe, mostly boils down to three issues, two of them intimately linked:

- (1) Are we really talking about “no growth” (or even worse, “anti-growth”) versus “pro growth”—or is this just another instance of misleading, inflammatory labeling?

If you allow higher population densities in some targeted areas but maintain current zoning in other targeted areas, isn't your county growing? Of course; but in a planned manner, which, I would think, is a pattern we'd all prefer. Perhaps we're really talking about where and how ADDITIONAL growth (beyond building on still-vacant land under existing zoning) should occur; and whether developers or the county should set the terms of that growth.

- (2) Is master-planned development with major upzoning better for the County than individual lot development at current zoning?

The first brings more options for infrastructure and opportunities for amenities like parks and trails, but also much more population to the area. If it's not a black-and-white question, then at what point are County gains from a master-planned mega-development overwhelmed by County losses due to impacts of the attendant population growth from that development? What criteria might be used to gauge these gains and losses? (How about a Comprehensive Plan?)

- (3) What is the function of the County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan (the “Comp Plan”), if the County's answer to issue #2's question is always “yes”?

Our county is at a crossroads. We can go down a fast and treacherous road that may lead to the loss of our most valued assets, even our very identity (think Green Valley or Glendale), by allowing mega-developments to determine the future shape of our communities. Or we can use the road map we have, the Comp Plan: the result of a long dialog within our community that reflects the values we hold most dear. It describes, among other things, where growth over existing zoning is desired, and where it is not. It states that the river should be conserved as a “living river”, which means its habitats, water cycles and floodplain should be maintained. It identifies “character areas” that differ in major ways, and which differences should be kept in place.

With our road map, we can travel more carefully, see more clearly, and have more control over where we're going on the growth road. Wasn't our map made just for this? Shouldn't it be our primary guide?

[Sherry Sass was trained as a biologist, and is currently President of Friends of the Santa Cruz River (FOSCR), a volunteer group dedicated to protecting the flow, water quality, and riparian habitat of the river. Visit www.friendsofsantacruzriver.org for more information.]