

Who Is the Government? -----Sherry Sass, 7/31/06

For those of you who missed it, last Thursday's Planning and Zoning hearing in Amado was a beautiful example of representative democracy in action. With a civil and respectful attitude, the P&Z Commission patiently listened through four hours of presentations and comments, and in the end, unanimously rejected an outrageously ill-conceived proposal, instead re-affirming Santa Cruz County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

The volunteer Commission, made up of nine residents appointed by the County Supervisors, listened well. After the Montosa Ranch developer's representatives told them about all the great things the proposal would mean to the community, fifty or so members of that community spoke, begging to differ. Only one person spoke in favor, a young construction worker who was under the impression that he could afford a house in the new development. He was given his time to comment, and was politely applauded.

But all the rest objected to the damage this huge proposal (2400+ homes on about 600 acres) could do to the area's water, wildlife, roads, schools, and community character. Some also pointed out that many of the developer's assertions of benefits were either deliriously overstated or just downright wrong. Lots of folks had obviously done their homework, and checked up on their claims.

We should be proud to have such a number of civic-minded, thoughtful, smart, eloquent residents who passionately care about where they live—not only on the Commission, but also in the community at large. These citizens were not hoodwinked by fancy graphics or the insistence by the developers that they were the good guys. The numbers did not add up; and besides, the proposal flew in the face of the Comprehensive Plan, in which the north county residents had clearly stated their desire to maintain a rural, low-density landscape that supported agriculture, the river ecosystem, open spaces and dark skies.

This is what civilization is about: a group of people living together within a mutually-agreed-upon framework of behavior that allows everyone to meet their own needs without preventing others from doing the same, now or in the future. At least, that's the ideal. It is thrilling to realize that, with all the oppression and violence in the world, we are actually part of the continuing (and peaceful) renewal of our own representative democracy, a great concept for civilization if there ever was one.

So from this author to those of you who worked so hard and chimed in on this particular issue, thank you. And to those who have yet to dip their toes into the stream of public discourse, please join us. If you can't come to a public hearing, you can write a letter or email, or make a phone call. If you don't know about an issue but are concerned, ask questions of those who will decide for you. A representative government can only work if those represented regularly inform their public servants, and keep a close eye on their actions. As Thomas Jefferson, to whom freedom and democracy were synonymous, said, "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

[Sherry Sass 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.]