

What is An Environment and Why do We Need a Report on It?

Almost everyone has heard of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), but do we really understand what it is? Is it an obstruction to growth and development devised and promoted by well-meaning but unrealistic nature-lovers? Or is it a logical means under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of assessing the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts that growth and development will have on the environment in which we live and in which our children and grandchildren will live? You decide.

First of all, consider what "environment" means. Through popular usage, we have come to associate the word with the natural world only. We think of wildlife, scenic vistas, open space, forestland, and protected and endangered species. The politics of language have narrowed the scope of what an environment is and, consequently, who is an environmentalist. In actuality, the environment includes both natural and man-made features, and if we further modify "environment" through the use of words such as "human" or "economic" or "social," we begin to get a better sense of the scope of an Environmental Impact Report.

True, an EIR will assess the impact of a development or even a community plan or general plan on plant and animal species, such as blue oaks and red-legged frogs, and other natural features like waterways and wetlands. But it will also address the human infrastructure required to support an "environment" of growth and development including roads and transportation, water delivery and sewage treatment, schools, fire and police protection, and parks and recreation. It will address, directly and indirectly, the more elusive elements of our environment such as archaeological and historical sites, community beauty and character, and economic well-being.

Under CEQA, a "negative declaration" is determined for a development project when the appropriate government agency (for us, the county planning department, planning commission and, ultimately, the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors) finds there is no significant impact to the existing environment. Therefore, no EIR is done. Given the rapid growth and development in our county, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a single project that will not have a significant impact on our environmental infrastructure, particularly our roads and emergency services and water and sewer services. Even though some planned projects and developments are small and of themselves do not offer a substantial change, when viewed within the context of an "environment" of growth and development, each one of them deserves scrutiny as part of the larger picture. As Reed F. Noss notes (in *Lasting Landscapes: Reflections on the Role of Conservation Science in Land Use Planning*), "Although individual projects may have relatively little impact, the cumulative impacts of many projects leads to 'death by a thousand cuts,' also described as a 'tyranny of small decisions.'"

Each of us has the right and the responsibility to let our local government officials know that we will not be governed by a "tyranny of small decisions." Demand Environmental Impact Reports on every development project submitted to the county planning department. It is your county, your community, your neighborhood, your street, your child's future you are protecting. An EIR is not an exercise in political correctness. It is your guarantee that your hometown will not grow without proper planning for growth. It is your guarantee that developers will have to properly mitigate the impacts of their development, including paying their fair share of costs to the community. A recent University of Wyoming study concluded,

"rural residential development costs taxpayers more than it contributes on average."
Instead of "negative declarations" for new developments, the county needs to be assessing
"negative dollars" instead.

In California, "the purpose of an EIR is to provide state and local agencies and the general public with detailed information on the potentially significant environmental effects which a proposed project is likely to have and to list ways the significant environmental effects may be minimized and indicate alternatives to the project." Remember what "environment" really means. It means your roads, bridges and bike paths. It means your fire, police and medical services. It means your schools and libraries. It means your grocery stores, restaurants and boutiques. It means your ranches and vineyards. It means your housing options. It means your community identity. It means your quality of life. And, of course, it also means the beauty and diversity of Nature.

--written by Muriel Zeller, for the Calaveras Planning Coalition, 5-30-07