

The Real Calaveras Planning Coalition

Guest Opinion

by Tom Infusino

It appears from the Guest Opinion in Friday's Calaveras Enterprise (8/31/07) that there is some confusion about the Calaveras Planning Coalition. As the Coalition's facilitator, I feel qualified to explain what the Coalition is, and what it is not.

The Calaveras Planning Coalition is fostered by the Community Action Project (CAP), which is a community-based, community-focused project in Calaveras County whose mission is to promote citizen participation in local government. CAP actively sought out citizens who were concerned about issues in their communities. What it found was that several citizen groups already existed in the county, citizen groups actively engaged in preserving the quality of life where they live. The Coalition formed around these groups, becoming a network that connected similar visions in all parts of the county.

From the beginning the Coalition has been a voice for 1) a complete update of the Calaveras County General Plan, 2) meaningful and broad citizen participation in the process, 3) the concurrent update and/or creation of community plans for every community with such aspirations, and 4) wise planning that preserves the historic, rural character of our unique communities and county.

Some of the groups that have signed on to the Coalition's eleven land use principles are primarily focused on environmental issues: Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, Foothill Conservancy, Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch. Many others are simply grassroots citizen groups looking out for the interests of communities in which their members live: MyValleySprings.com, Wallace Citizens Serving Residents, Citizens for San Andreas.

The Coalition and its member groups regularly provide both written evidence and oral arguments to the Planning Department, to the Planning Commission, and to the Board of Supervisors. For example, on June 1, the Coalition provided two volumes of background information to the County and its general plan consultants on issues of concern that should be treated in the General Plan Update. These issues of concern included law enforcement, fire hazards, water, housing, roads, child care, air quality, energy, open space, flooding, and noise. These issues are not the exclusive domain of one interest group or one political party, they are the issues that concern all of us, and that affect us every day.

My qualifications as Facilitator of the Coalition include both a planning degree and a law degree. I have over 15 years of experience advising participants in planning processes in counties throughout the region. I have taught the Coalition and its member groups how to effectively participate in planning processes, including the General Plan Update. Each Coalition member group uses that information as they see fit.

So why is a law degree useful to groups helping to update the General Plan? Since the General Plan is basically a 200-page law, it makes sense to consult a lawyer when updating it. While I have filed four cases against one county (El Dorado), I have also helped conflicting parties to resolve their differences without going to court on dozens of occasions. Calaveras County has a planning staff and legal counsel; and developers also have attorneys and project staff. I am pleased to help the Coalition provide community groups with access to a similarly skilled professional.

The Coalition is not a participant in partisan politics. As a project of a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization, the Coalition cannot endorse a candidate, even if it wanted to. Some people on the Coalition's steering group are Republicans, and some are Democrats; some are male and others are female; some are working and some are retired. All kinds of people care about the well being of their communities.

In short, the Coalition's task is to bring hope for a brighter future to communities whose needs have been too long neglected, and whose voices have been too long dismissed. Change is coming. Change can be scary. This is not the time to lash out from fear, not the time to vilify people with different ideas, and not the time to divide communities against themselves. The courageous response to change is for people to listen to one another (even the people they disagree with), to envision a common brighter future, and to do the hard work to make it happen. That hard work starts with plans. Plans are followed by implementation programs and projects, and by commitment and investment. With our futures, and those of our children at stake, we must choose the courageous response.

Tom Infusino is the Facilitator of the Calaveras Planning Coalition. Their 11 planning principles and other information is available on their web site website at <http://www.calaverascap.com/Coalition.htm>