

To: The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors
Regarding: The Draft Agriculture and Forestry Element
From: Muriel Zeller

January 20, 2009

*The sun, three half-centuries since that glut, that hunger,
still works its other Calaveras claim, teases soil, now the richer vein.*

Catherine Webster

(“Loose Blooming” from The Thicket Daybreak)

Dear Supervisors,

I am writing in support of including a stand-alone Agriculture and Forestry Element in the updated Calaveras County General Plan. Further, I support inclusion of the draft Agriculture and Forestry Element written by the Calaveras County Agriculture Coalition. Without receiving significant attention and protection, agricultural land will continue to be rapidly converted to non-agricultural use, particularly in the western portion of the county. The urbanization of agricultural land threatens the economic viability of agriculture, reduces open space, impacts rural character, degrades the watershed, and diminishes our Western heritage. Of particular concern is the proliferation of low-density exurban development commonly referred to as “ranchettes.”

It is often suggested that the Sierra Nevada foothills should absorb the residential overflow from the Central Valley, because our soil is less fertile and the land lost to housing is, therefore, less significant. While some of our local wine grape growers may feel otherwise, based simply on soil quality, the argument may have some validity. But when other factors such as biodiversity, watershed protection, natural beauty, and the more intangible values associated with our Western heritage and open spaces are considered, the argument falls apart. The supreme irony, of course, in parceling our landscape into “ranchettes” is that we are destroying the last vestiges of the wide-open spaces that have come to exemplify the Western experience. We destroy the very thing we have mythologized and, in so doing, have created another category of want called “exurbia.”

Simply stated exurbia is “urban-dependent, low-density development. These are places that are outside of built-up urban landscapes, but within the commutershed of a major urban

area.”¹ There is growing evidence that exurban style development has a significant adverse impact on the natural environment, especially when considered in relation to the number of humans housed and the species impacted. As Reed F. Noss notes, “Dispersed exurban development is an increasing trend that poses a significant threat to biodiversity, especially when it occurs in wildlands or ranchlands as opposed to intensive agricultural landscapes.”² Calaveras County is composed of just such wildlands and ranchlands. Noss was reiterating the concern of David M. Theobald, “I believe that this lower-density exurban development is at least as important as the types of land use change typically associated with urbanization, because it is even more resource-consumptive, expansive, and challenging to conservation of bio-diversity.”³

One out of every six acres developed in California since the Gold Rush was paved over between 1990 and 2004.⁴ Far more land is being converted to housing than is necessary to provide for the growing population. In the United States, “Over the past 20 years, the acreage per person for new housing almost doubled. Most of this land is outside of existing urban areas.”⁵ Either our population must cease to grow, or the continued proliferation of scattered low-density residential development must end. Otherwise, how are we to preserve agricultural lands, working landscapes, wildlife habitat, and open space? We will run out of land and *water*.

A recent article in the Calaveras Enterprise reported, “Building more homes closer together within easy walking distance of stores and services may be the best way to deal with dwindling water supplies...” This was one of the observations from Calaveras Water and Land Use: Today and Tomorrow, an all-day workshop held in Murphys. Speakers “painted an urgent need to rethink development policies and planning.” Patricia Hickson of the Sierra Nevada Alliance “said that the current model with homes on one to five acres located far from services is heavily impacting supplies and water quality.”⁶ With the Sierras providing well over half of the state’s water, we have yet another reason to rethink the “ranchette” mentality.

¹ “Defining Exurbia,” Ohio State University Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics, Exurban Change Program, <http://exurban.osu.edu/defining.htm>, 2009.

² Noss, Reed F., Ph. D, “Conservation Thresholds: Overview and Commentary,” Lasting Landscapes: Reflections on the Role of Conservation Science in Land Use Planning, Environmental Law Institute, 2007, page 6.

³ Theobald, David M., Ph. D, “Challenges in Bridging Conservation Science and Land Use Planning,” Lasting Landscapes: Reflections on the Role of Conservation Science in Land Use Planning, Environmental Law Institute, 2007, page 14.

⁴ “Paving Paradise: A New Perspective on California Farmland Conversion,” American Farmland Trust, 2007, page 6.

⁵ “Fact Sheet: Why Save Farmland?” American Farmland Trust and Farmland Information Center, 2003.

⁶ Langley, Claudette, “Mountains of Thirst,” Calaveras Enterprise, Nov. 11, 2008, page 1.

There is a common misperception about open space in Calaveras County and other foothill counties. It appears to remain vast and expansive—unspoiled. Yet, thousands of acres in western Calaveras County alone are already zoned for 5-acre residential development.⁷ This land currently *appears* to be open, but it won't remain as such for long. Because of private ownership, the lower elevations of the Sierra Nevada Range are the most vulnerable. While some large landowners, such as ranchers, may want to continue to preserve their heritage and that of the region, economic and environmental pressures can force subdivision and sale of the land. Ranchettes “tend to make agricultural production more difficult and expensive with demands that routine agricultural practices be curtailed or modified to protect the health and security of new neighbors. And they create an additional market demand for rural land that in many regions is inflating its price to a level above what commercial agriculture can pay and still remain economically viable. In this sense, ranchettes are like the bow wave created ahead of a ship; long before the ship itself hits, anything in its path will be swamped by the wave.”⁸

The oak woodlands of Calaveras County and other foothill counties in the region represent the most diverse ecosystem in the Sierra Nevada, but they also contain approximately 70% of the region's population and have been most affected by development. Less than 1% of the foothills are protected from development, and much of the area lies within commuting distance of the rapidly growing cities of the Central Valley. Of the 521,409 total acres in Calaveras County, 389,643 (75%) are privately owned.⁹ Private ownership of the land means private disposition of the land. So we are faced with the thorny issue of reconciling private and public benefits. The proposed Agriculture and Forestry Element offers multiple conservation strategies utilizing public/private partnerships that will preserve our working landscapes.

In Calaveras County, rural residential development does not support itself, which is not surprising given that it rarely supports itself anywhere. “Cost of Community Service studies conducted over the last 20 years show working lands generate more public revenues than they receive back in public services.”¹⁰ Cows don't call 911. “On average, because residential land uses do not cover their costs, they must be subsidized by other community land uses. Converting agricultural land to residential land use should not be seen as a way to balance local budgets.”¹¹ Residential growth that does not pay for itself increases the pressure on existing residents to pay for failing and inadequate infrastructure.

⁷ Calaveras County General Plan Land Use Designations Map, July 2008.

⁸ “Paving Paradise,” p. 5.

⁹ “Planning for the Future: A Sierra Land-Use Index,” Sierra Nevada Alliance, June 2005, p. iii.

¹⁰ “Fact Sheet: Cost of Community Services Studies,” American Farmland Trust and Farmland Information Center, August 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Rural character must be appreciated as more than a marketing strategy for residential development, and new residents must gain some understanding of the place to which they have chosen to move. Services are limited in Calaveras County—especially retail, professional, and, yes, emergency services. Jobs are scarce. There are rattlesnakes, ticks, coyotes, and mountain lions. It's hot in the summer, and it's dark at night. Even if we create urban-style parks, the aforementioned critters may very well make themselves at home in them. People can't expect to instantly recreate the urban amenities they left behind. Some of them simply cannot and should not be duplicated. This is a rural county with *small* towns. For many, the romantic notion of country living does not always match its reality. As one writer put it, exurbanites “remain urban in spirit.”

On November 27, 2007, The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors adopted a Policy Resolution regarding discretionary development projects pending completion of the current general plan update in an effort to forestall continued rural sprawl and provide adequate water, roads, and sewer service. The policy states:

1. All divisions of land will be served by public surface water and public sewer with the exception of those projects where: (a) all parcels to be created are in excess of 40 acres; or (b) only one additional parcel is being created. Remainder parcels shall be counted as an additional parcel; and
2. Protect onsite open space and habitat; and
3. Provide onsite roads built to the standards set forth in the County road ordinance, including provisions for maintenance of roads that are not accepted into the County-maintained road system; and
4. Encourage utilization of voluntary implementation measures of the housing element as they pertain to reaching the county's affordable housing goals.¹²

While this policy is laudable, it is currently an advisory policy only and enforceable at the supervisors' discretion. The development community has shown hostility toward the policy, because it does not allow for the indiscriminate and inefficient conversion of land. It is my hope that this policy will become a mandate. Its intent is reinforced in the proposed Agriculture and Forestry Element.

I have heard Supervisor Thomas question the wisdom of this policy (though he voted for it). He has asked, “What's wrong with Rancho Calaveras? It's what Calaveras County is known for.” And therein lives the problem. To answer the supervisor's question, I would say low-

¹² Board of Supervisors, County of Calaveras, State of California, RESOLUTION ADOPTING POLICY REGARDING CRITERIA FOR DISCRETIONARY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED PENDING COMPLETION OF THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE WORK PROGRAM AND ASSOCIATED ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT, Resolution No. 07-242, November 27, 2007.

density rural residential development or ranchettes like those in Rancho Calaveras, will eat up our land at an alarming rate and provide little housing for the acreage consumed. Ranchettes will stretch necessary road, water, and sewer infrastructure past our ability to provide and maintain it. They will degrade the watershed. They will have a disproportionate affect on habitat and biodiversity. They will destroy our ranches and rangeland. They will distort our views, both literally and figuratively. They will fragment the last vestiges of the West. They will eliminate our places of solace. They will make us less, and they will make our children wonder what we were thinking.

In Calaveras County, a political population inclined toward conservative policies presently makes local resistance to the market forces of growth unlikely. We must, however, begin to utilize land use planning strategies that are more than a blueprint for land development and demonstrate and refine the economic benefits of growth and development that is responsive to our environment. We must incorporate conservation and preservation strategies that will effectively limit the consumption and conversion of open space to protect our history, natural resources, species habitat, and agricultural land. These are the things for which Calaveras County should be known.

Calaveras County, in particular western Calaveras County, will become little more than an exurbanized bedroom community for the Central Valley without beauty or distinction if we do not concentrate development within community centers and incorporate shared open space into our residential developments. We *can* limit the impact on the human and natural environments. Utilizing build-out scenarios, we *can* see into the future. We must redefine growth to mean more than dumb expansion. We must stop the proliferation of ranchettes—even if it hurts. The dream of owning that “little bit o’ country” must be re-envisioned to reflect the little bit of the country that’s left.

I urge the board to enthusiastically support the inclusion of the Calaveras County Agriculture Coalition’s draft Agriculture and Forestry Element into the updated General Plan. This Element will help preserve our rangeland, our open space, our watershed, our habitat, and our heritage. The “Conversion Criteria” contained in the Element will prevent inappropriate conversions of agricultural land, leapfrog development, and incompatible uses adjacent to agricultural operations. I look forward to the public comment period for the updated General Plan, which will provide the opportunity for suggestions to make this Element an even better document. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Muriel Zeller

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cc:

Robert Garamendi, Calaveras County Agriculture Coalition

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