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Calaveras Planning Coalition Provides Only Public Comment on General Plan Priorities

San Andreas – During the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday, February 15, Interim Planning Director Gina Kathan reviewed a report on general plan implementation priorities which were established by the Board in January 2020. The Calaveras Planning Coalition (CPC) provided the only public comment on general plan implementation at the meeting. Although the CPC posed a number of questions to the Board, the Board did not respond.

The CPC is a federation of regional and local organizations, community groups, and concerned individuals who promote public participation in land use and resource planning to ensure a healthy human, natural, and economic environment now and in the future. The County’s lack of commitment to implement measures to reduce the adverse impacts of the General Plan was one of the reasons that, on December 9, 2019, the CPC filed a case to challenge the General Plan in Calaveras County Superior Court. The CPC suit argues convincingly that the Supervisors violated state planning law and the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) when they adopted the current General Plan in November 2019. The case has yet to be settled or heard in court.

“We get it that people are worn out with the never ending General Plan saga,” said Muriel Zeller, a member of the Community Action Project Governing Committee, which administers the CPC. “Nevertheless, the Planning Coalition will persist in holding our county government accountable.

Many people don't understand that citizens, people like us, are responsible for enforcing CEQA through litigation or the threat thereof. Suing the county is not what we wanted to do. Ultimately, we believe it is what we had to do to protect and sustain our rural communities.”

During the meeting, Kathan announced that public workshops on the draft update of the Calaveras County Zoning Code may begin as early as this spring as the zoning code update is one of the Board's top priorities. CPC Facilitator Tom Infusino was pleased with the announcement. “A good code will help local residents protect the things that they like about their communities while helping to preserve the integrity of resource production lands and the natural environment. It will also help development applicants get their projects approved.”

The zoning code update has been organized into three parts for ease of work and public review. Two of the three parts of the draft update are nearly complete. County staff are working with Miller Planning Associates to complete work on the documents. The Zoning Code addresses a number of issues related to development in community centers and on resource production lands. The new code is intended to complement the updated zoning map which was adopted in April of 2021.

Many Board members expressed their support for a dark sky ordinance to protect beloved views of starry night skies from unnecessary light pollution. After Supervisor Callaway stated, “I would like a dark sky ordinance,” many board members expressed their support. Supervisor Tofanelli correctly recalled that there was a draft ordinance discussed back in 2009 and 2010. Supervisor Garamendi apparently believes, “A dark sky ordinance is a good thing to do,” provided that enforcement does not become over-burdensome. Supervisor Stopper added, “I completely agree.” Ms. Kathan called the Board's direction on this one point, “Loud and clear.”

Adding to the workload this spring will be two more implementation priorities. The Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Reduction Plan will begin soon after the Board of Supervisors meets in March to resolve issues raised during the Planning Commission's review of the “2018 Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventories” completed in November 2021. In addition, the County will be seeking help from consultants regarding the multi-year update process for the Road Impact Mitigation (RIM) and Benefit Basin fees that are used to fund road projects needed to serve new development.

The Board deferred identifying any additional implementation priorities until later in the year when they hope to hire a new Planning Director. Peter Maurer, the previous director, retired nearly a year ago in March 2021.

One unanswered question is who is going to do all this implementation work? The Planning Department's report indicated that the pace of the work has been slow due to a lack of staff at the County departments dealing with planning, agriculture, and geographic information systems (GIS).

Another unanswered question is when will the work begin to replace the community plans for Arnold, Murphys/Douglas Flat, and Avery/Hathaway Pines? These plans were removed from the general plan in 2019. The Board has not listed replacement of these plans as one of its priorities.

However, the really big unanswered question is when will the County complete the implementation measures included in the 2019 General Plan Update that have not been prioritized but indefinitely deferred? The update itself dragged on for 13 years.

To date, the County has completed only a handful of the over 100 one-time tasks to implement the 2019 General Plan Update. The unfinished list includes many issues critical to the future health, safety, and prosperity of the residents of Calaveras County such as fire safety, law enforcement funding, water security, traffic and pedestrian safety, noise reduction, flood protection, and community design guidelines. The list also includes measures to address the conservation of cultural resources, scenic resources, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. The County has chosen no priorities and set no deadlines to implement measures to resolve these issues.

CPC Facilitator Infusino noted, “This unfinished list of implementation measures leaves developers uncertain regarding the requirements for project approval and residents uncertain about the futures of their communities and the surrounding resource production lands. This uncertainty is bad for economic development, bad for local residents, and bad for the environment.”

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