

BUTTE COUNTY GENERAL PLAN 2030

FIRE HAZARD ISSUES

BACKGROUND: The Alternatives Evaluation Report¹ designated 15 of 31 study areas as fire hazard areas. On 29 and 30 July the Board of Supervisors tentatively approved housing development for 22 of the study areas².

DISCUSSION: All or portions of 12 study areas³—tentatively approved for 44,000 dwelling units with a potential population of over 110,000—are located in fire hazard zones. Nine of the study areas are high or very high fire hazard zones⁴.

Wildland fires in Northern California during the early summer of 2008 emphasized the high danger to people and property of living in fire hazard areas. The loss of life was minimal and the loss of property was modest, but the potential remains for huge losses in both categories.

The current Policy Alternatives document for General Plan 2030 deals with potential fire hazards as a voluntary issue: "Encourage defensible space, fire safe building construction, fuel management and wildfire preparedness, particularly by working in collaboration with the Butte County Fire Safe Council, the municipalities and State agencies⁵."

The current wording would seem to support the view that people should not be forced to build to special standards if they are willing to accept the risk of loss to a wildland fire, but virtually no one would argue that those same people should not receive firefighting response. And therein lies the public interest in mandating mitigation of the potential loss of life or private property in fire hazard areas. The cost of fire fighting is borne by the public at large—not only by the individual homeowners who chose to reside in especially risky areas—and an important way to protect the general public from the huge expenses associated with fighting and recovering from wildland fires is to mandate certain protective measure that would complement effective fire fighting organization.

RECOMMENDATION: In the Health and Safety Element of General Plan 2030, require measures to mitigate the potential damage and loss of life in fire hazard areas as follows:

- The County shall adopt, apply, and enforce defensible space standards for fire hazard areas
- The County shall adopt and apply fire-resistant design and materials standards for new construction in fire hazard areas, high fire hazard areas, and very high fire hazard areas.
- The County shall work collaboratively with fire safe councils, municipalities, and State agencies to mitigate the threat of wildland fires.

¹ Butte County General Plan 2030 Alternatives Evaluation Report, Design, Community & Environment (DCE), March 13, 2008

² <http://www.buttegeneralplan.net/products/4pa/>

³ Study areas 2, 4 thru 6, 8, 10 thru 13, 23, 24, and 26

⁴ Study areas 4 thru 6, 8, 10 thru 13, and 23

⁵ Butte County General Plan 2030, Policy Alternatives, August 2008, pg 24

BUTTE COUNTY GENERAL PLAN 2030

FISCAL AND PUBLIC SERVICE ISSUES

BACKGROUND: Over the past 17 years there have been at least three fiscal analyses of development impact in Butte County: studies on the Rancho Esquon and Stringtown Mountain proposals¹ in the early 1990s and a white paper in 2000². Each of these analyses concluded that most configurations of purely residential development would not pay for themselves. However, those conclusions were based on the County receiving a lower share of property taxes than is now the case. The share of property taxes received by the County during the timeframe of the earlier analyses was about 13 percent³. The County share now averages 17.5 percent⁴. While this increase is significant, the cost of County government has also increased over the period, and the fiscal analysis contained in the general plan Alternatives Evaluation Report seems to concentrate on only two aspects of County services, the fire department and Sheriff patrol operations.

DISCUSSION: Alternatives Evaluation Report methodology does not address the full fiscal implications of future development in the County. Many more County functions are fiscally impacted by development than are mentioned in the report. It is not clear that the generally neutral to positive ratings assigned to most study areas for overall fiscal impact consider the fact that most County departments need revenue increases to deal with population growth.

Some other major functions funded substantially by the general purpose revenue that funds fire and Sheriff operations are the County jail, the Probation Department, including the Juvenile Hall, District Attorney criminal prosecution, libraries, the County's mandatory contribution to trial courts, and veterans' services and halls. If growth is to actually have a neutral or positive fiscal impact, all of these functions and others must be included in the calculation.

However, it is not possible for any single analysis to reasonably project relationships between development and County services over the 20-year perspective of the general plan. County revenue sources may change over time, and potential revenue from development is sensitive to proposal-specific factors such as residential densities and sales prices and the mix of other land uses such as retail, commercial, industrial, hospitality, etc.

BOTTOM LINE:

The only way to reasonably estimate the fiscal impact of development is to require an independent fiscal analysis of specific projects at the time they are proposed.

Although sometimes seen as a roadblock to development, fiscal impact analysis actually has a potential for helping developers and government come to agreement on development designs that moderate fiscal impact through a fiscally aware mix of land uses.

RECOMMENDATION: In the Public Facilities and Services Element of General Plan 2030, require an independent fiscal analysis for any development proposed for over 100 dwelling units as follows:

- The County shall adopt criteria for independent fiscal impact analyses which shall be accomplished for all proposed developments of over 100 dwelling units and shall be considered during the development approval process.

¹ Fiscal impact analyses by the author of this paper as a Butte County Deputy Administrative Officer, presented to the Butte County Board of Supervisors circa 1993-94

² White Paper: Economic Development & Fiscal Well-Being in Butte County, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc (EPS). January 2000

³ EPS, Appendix A, Notes to Table A-2(8)

⁴ Butte County General Plan 2030 Alternatives Evaluation Report, Design, Community & Environment (DCE), March 13, 2008, Appendix B, p B-4, Property Tax Share

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

I believe there are four mandatory elements:

- 1) Our environment: we must have:
 - our community plans in place;
 - a process that works for permitting and opening new businesses as quickly as possible;
 - accountability to the social and physical environments;
 - a community vision for all people to prosper.

- 2) Our attitude: we must commit to:
 - being positive toward each other, especially our elected officials;
 - help others succeed;
 - issue their permits expeditiously;
 - saying YES to requests from new people to live, work and play in Butte County or any of its cities.

- 3) Our behavior: we must actually DO things like:
 - issue permits on time;
 - say yes to those new people's requests;
 - VOTE as individuals and in our official capacities, particularly focusing on issues of private or public investment opportunities;
 - work with the entire community.

- 4) Our investment: we must financially support:
 - each other's work, business and new ideas;
 - those who wish to join our community;
 - the infrastructure and the service providers we use and need for the future by paying our share;
 - our neighborhoods by maintaining our buildings.

These elements MUST be present; they manifest in the form of capital availability, planned and consistent growth, positive community participation and JOBS.

Are there any other elements to ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

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Diversity is key to successful farming in the Sierra foothills

By Bob Johnson

Horton Iris Garden in Loomis is situated on land that Doug Horton's gold miner and cattle rancher ancestors settled 150 years ago. Horton's grandparents later turned what was a 200-acre farm into a tree fruit orchard with pears, plums, peaches and a few dozen apple trees.

"All of the Loomis Basin used to be in fruit trees until fruit started coming in from farther south to hit the market first and get the best prices," said Horton, who is a fifth generation farmer on land a few miles east of Sacramento.

Horton's grandparents eventually sold off pieces of the land to be able to retire, but the family held onto 40 acres. They farm seven acres in iris bulbs, day lilies, lavender and pumpkins.

"We managed to hold onto a part of the farm," Horton said, between tours as a tractor driver carrying visiting youngsters around a seasonal pumpkin patch.

The two-acre pumpkin patch started four years ago when Doug Horton planted a few pumpkins with his daughter. The youngsters were on the farm as part of the 5th annual Placer Farm & Barn Tour that brought thousands of urban residents to 10 farms in the Sierra foothills in the middle of October.

Nearly all of the harvest at Horton Iris Garden is sold directly to visitors to the farm, and Horton said he figures many of the people who came on that Saturday afternoon this fall will be back for iris bulbs next spring.

Mandarins are one crop where growers in the foothills outside Sacramento have an edge on their competition from flatter, warmer areas.

"We're right on the edge of the region where you can grow mandarins," said Gordon Poulsen, who owns Willow Creek Ranch in Penryn. "This is the coolest area where you can grow them. Any cooler and you won't get a crop, but any warmer and I don't think the taste is as good."

Poulsen spoke as he demonstrated how to graft and tape a new tree. He advised the visitors against using flat-edged pruners on citrus in their yards because they bruise the trees. And he also advised against using dwarf rootstocks because they starve the trees of water and nutrients.

"I won't have a dwarf tree on my place," he said. "People ask me why I plant mandarins on tight 10-foot by 10-foot spacing with standard rootstocks. I'm going to prune them to the size I want."

Poulsen takes full advantage of the cooler weather in his orchard, which is around 1,000 feet in elevation. He said he delays his harvest until the mandarins are sweet and ready to eat, which is usually around the second week of November.

"Buy from local growers," Poulsen said. "You know what you're getting, and if you have a problem with the fruit you can come and see us."

Many of the foothills farmers rely heavily on sales to nearby residents of the Sacramento metropolitan area.



Doug Horton of Horton Iris Garden in Loomis has found a way to make his small acreage produce agricultural income. The family farms seven acres in iris bulbs, day lilies, lavender and pumpkins.

Three-fourths of the bonsai trees and landscape plants from Hiro Matsuda's nursery outside Newcastle are sold to people who live less than 50 miles away.

"In bonsai we learn to keep the trees the size we want," Matsuda said, as he showed a group of well-proportioned olive trees less than 2 feet tall.

The keys to bonsai production are trimming the plant correctly and confining the roots to restrict growth to the desired size.

"There are no bonsai varieties, but we usually use dwarf varieties of fruiting plants for the proportions," Matsuda said.

While Matsuda explained the art of bonsai to several visitors, young people on the tour were drawn to a pair of gentle alpacas Bonnie Potter had brought to the nursery from her Fair Winds Alpacas in Auburn. Potter breeds and sells the animals, which naturally produce wool in a striking range of colors.

The Placer Farm & Barn Tour has become so popular among area residents, and so helpful to the foothills farmers, that it is about to evolve into a number of smaller and more manageable events.

An estimated 2,500 area residents took part in this year's tour, according to Placer County agricultural marketing director Nancy Jo Rieske. The event has become so successful over the last five years that it is being replaced by a series of seasonal events rather than one annual event. The first of these seasonal events will be this December and include Christmas tree farms, mandarin orchards and vineyards.

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