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OPINION

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Amador County General Plan Update threatens county's future, fails local residents

By Susan Manning, Cecily
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GUEST COMMENTARY

Everyone who lives in or visits Amador County loves this place. It's one of the most scenic counties in the state, with high quality of life, clean air and water, abundant wildlife, rich history, deep Native roots, beautiful rivers, authentic working ranches and true community character. But if the Amador County general plan update proceeds on its current path, we will lose much of what we love about our county today.

Next Tuesday, July 19, the Amador County Planning Commission will review the county's updated general plan and its environmental impact report. That sounds about as exciting as watching paint dry, but exciting or not — let us assure you that the plan is critical to keeping Amador County a special place to live, work, visit and retire. The outcome of this planning process will affect your life — and the lives of your children and theirs — every day for decades to come.

A county general plan is often called its “constitution” — it's that important and foundational. Since our current general plan is so old that much of it was typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter, the county began to update the plan in 2006. Next week's hearing is the latest step as the county nears the conclusion of a decade-long planning process.

The new general plan will define Amador County's future. It should be a statement of what we want our county to be, and it should be very clear. The plan should clearly define where development will and won't occur, how development will and won't occur, what will stay much the same, and what will change. It should lay out a clear road map the county can follow to meet the needs of local residents for roads, fire protection, water, schools and more.

Clarity is critical for all of us. Landowners need to know what they can do with their land, local residents need to know where and how development will occur, and businesses and developers need to know what to expect when they invest here. When the “rules of the game” are muddy, no one knows how to play. With a vague plan, a community ends up with ad-hoc, project-by-project

decision-making of the type we see far too often in Amador today. We deserve better.

The general plan should clearly protect what people value about our county. But according to the county's own environmental impact report, the draft general plan will allow development to harm local scenic resources, obscure the stars at night, degrade the county's “visual character,” convert farmland to developed uses, create land-use conflicts with existing agricultural uses, convert forests to other uses, pollute our air, harm our wildlife, put people and homes at risk from wildland fire, diminish groundwater supplies, make our neighborhoods noisier, increase water demand and the need for expensive facilities, and worsen traffic congestion.

The proposed general plan supports the notion that Amador County needs to change dramatically for “progress.” Its lack of clarity means that pretty much anyone could change our county in any way they want in the foreseeable future. It also fails to address the cost of those changes, which will be huge, or to ensure that developers will pay their own way.

Does that sound like your vision for Amador County? Is that really what we want the county to be like 20 years from now?

The plan also fails to adequately address key current planning issues that have come up since the update process began in 2006: the proliferation of winery tasting rooms around the rural parts of the county (and the events that come with them), wildland fire prevention and protection, and the proliferation of small-box retail “formula stores” like Dollar General in rural communities.

The good news, however, is this: We don't have to settle for a bad plan in order to facilitate appropriate levels of growth and development in Amador County. We can learn from what other counties have done wrong — and what they've done right.

A number of agencies and organizations provided the county with constructive

suggestions for lessening the draft general plan's adverse effects. The Foothill Conservancy, Caltrans, State Historic Preservation Office, and California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection all offered positive solutions. The Conservancy's comments included a number of policies that other rural counties have put in place to protect wildlife habitat, working ranches and farms, air quality, scenic beauty and more. While the county's consultants recently revised the plan to reduce allowed housing density in very-high-fire-risk areas and strengthen fire standards for development in those areas — they rejected nearly all of the other constructive suggestions.

Unfortunately, the county appears to be in a rush to get done with the plan before the fall supervisorial election. After 10 years of work, the citizens deserve better. We deserve a plan that protects what people value about our county while providing for economic development, housing, new businesses and well-planned growth. And we deserve a plan that will not allow this special place to turn into Anywhere U.S.A., but which instead retains all of what makes our county such a beautiful, wonderful place to live and visit.

We are puzzled by the rush to approve this bad draft plan. Instead of pushing the decade-long process at the end, the county needs to take the time to get things right. It needs to address the failings in the plan now, and take on the new issues that have come to the fore in recent years.

To do anything less is to consign our county to a future that few would embrace, if given the choice.

We urge local residents to attend the hearing next Tuesday night at 7 p.m. This is your county, and its future is in your hands — or should be.

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