

Power to the People

That corny slogan from the '60s has taken on fresh meaning, after the Santa Cruz County Planning and Zoning Commission worked so well for us on two recent proposals to amend the one-year-old Comprehensive Plan. As we've celebrated our nation's birthday not too long ago, this may be a good time to also celebrate the people that continue to make this country a remarkable experiment in thoughtful democracy.

Scores of county citizens had labored for two years to craft the Plan, which is broken into several "character areas" so that each self-identified area, like Rio Rico or the northwest county, could determine for itself what overall County goals were most important to its future. And now, under the Plan's guidance, the P&Z Commission has wisely helped two character areas to reach their goals.

The first meeting was the most dramatic. For three hours, an overwhelming number of members of the public voiced strong opposition to a developer's request to allow almost 3,000 new houses on a 624 acre parcel east of the Santa Cruz River in the Plan-designated rural/agricultural Northwest County Character Area. My comments to oppose this amendment, on behalf of Friends of the Santa Cruz River, focused on the documented importance of this particular area for animal migration between the Tumacacori and Santa Rita Mountains; the proposed intense development would effectively close off this east-west corridor, in which river habitat provides a perfect rest and refueling stop.

Others stated major objections which included damaging impacts on existing schools, County services, transportation (even if the developer built a bridge, the county would have to replace it when it washed out), dark skies, and the very character of the area—dominated by agriculture and open space—that the Plan is supposed to protect. And possibly worst of all, if this amendment were allowed, similar changes would have to be granted for other landowners in the area too; so the damage would be enormously multiplied.

But in the end, the Commission did the right thing, and recommended (to the Board of Supervisors, who have the final say) to keep the Comprehensive Plan unamended in this case. They did not see a clear enough benefit to the county, or the character area, to support this major change.

However, the second meeting was ultimately the more telling. It was about a request to exchange densities (no net increase) in a development east of Nogales, so that fewer houses would be built near the river and more would go up in the hills near State Rte. 82. There were some clear benefits to the change that related to Plan goals, such as sparing river habitat from dense development nearby, reducing new road lengths, and building nearer to existing water and sewer lines. But other impacts might not be so good for the county or the land. A spirited discussion ensued, and questions about trading impacts on the river with impacts on slopes were considered, as was the possibility that many lots near the river could not have been built on anyway, so the developer would in effect get a

density bonus by moving those to buildable areas. There was some discussion of tabling the request until more information became available, but finally, the Commission decided to recommend the amendment be accepted. Since the developer would next have to apply for rezoning to get the change to happen, the P&Z would get the information, and the final proposal, it wanted at the rezoning stage, or might not allow rezoning at all. An amendment does not, in fact, give the applicant any new rights; it just makes it possible to go to the next stage of County approval, where the proposal gets more finely tuned.

The purpose of the P&Z Commission, the County Planning Department, and the Comprehensive Plan is not simply to make developers jump through hoops. It is to assure, as much as possible, that the County is developed in such a way that benefits to existing and future residents are maximized, and future costs—both monetary and in losing what we love about where we live—are minimized. This is as it should be. We are fortunate indeed to live in a country where even if you're not a big landowner or a powerful politician, you can, collectively, have a voice as to how you want your home to be.