

Mixed-use zoning gains momentum

Planning Commission OKs General Plan amendment, wants some density limits

By **MIKE ROBERTS**
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The Planning Commission has taken an important step toward creating affordable communities where residents can walk or bike to recreation, shopping, dining or even their jobs.

Commissioners recently gave their blessing to a General Plan amendment that would allow apartments or condominiums above first floor stores and restaurants, with the caveat that the county supervisors limit peak mixed-use density in some community regions when they hear the item in March 2009.

The county General Plan supports limited mixed-use, but until now there's been no corresponding zoning mechanism to support it.

Since most of the residences in mixed-use projects would likely be apartments or condominiums Senior Planner Shawna Purvines, the Development Services Department's designated mixed-use pitch-man, recommended allowing an admittedly optimistic 24 units per acre maximum density in Community Regions, consistent with multi-family zoning.

Tom Heflin, the CSUS professor who owns Rainbow Orchards in Camino, was one of several in attendance at the Nov. 13 Planning Commission meeting who spoke out for lower densities in rural areas.

"You can do 24 [units per acre] in El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park," he said. "But in Camino you can probably only do four or six. One size does not fit all."

Purvines countered that constraints on development such as sewer, slope and infrastructure still apply, and should filter inappropriate projects from the process.

Mixed-use projects would have to survive the full scrutiny of the county planning process. Traffic studies and mitigation would be required, as would compliance with the full gamut of development standards, including: height, setbacks, floor area ratio, parking, landscaping, architecture, etc.

The amendment requires at least 30-percent of each qualifying project to be commercial. That, in combination with the county's 50-foot height limitation makes 24 residences per acre unlikely in rural areas, Purvines said, adding that the mere possibility of that density will help meet future state housing requirements.

Urban planners are quick to point out that mixed-use, clustered development is essential to creating regional transit options that get people out of their cars, reducing traffic, pollution, global warming, and the demand for costly roads.

Mixed-use development, particularly as infill, is good for the local economy, said Purvines, because it supports "more continuous and sustainable development in areas where much of the road and utility infrastructure is already in place," and is "less vulnerable to the boom and bust cycles of traditional suburban development."

The planners, commissioner and board members

who create and approve General Plan policies face increased pressures for denser and more affordable housing from the state with its Smart Growth, Affordable Housing and anti-global warming initiatives that oppose the "sprawl" development which until now had defined El Dorado County.

In counterpoint, residents have made it clear that they want to keep their sprawling country lanes rural. The developers, in no hurry to build in the current economic downturn, have stayed largely behind the scenes, waiting for the dust to settle.

Target areas for density

The 2004 General Plan directs higher density residential development, including mixed-use, into unincorporated areas of the county labeled "Community Regions" and "Rural Centers."

Community Regions include: El Dorado Hills, Cameron Park, Shingle Springs, Camino, Pollock Pines, Diamond Springs and El Dorado.

The county's two incorporated cities, Placerville and South Lake Tahoe, control their own land use and are exempt from the amendment. Planned developments such as El Dorado Hills Town Center, Serrano, Marble Valley and Bass Lake are also outside the purview of the amendment, because all land use in those projects is specified in advance.

Mixed use would also be encouraged in "Rural Centers," including the central areas of Pilot Hill, Cool, Somerset, Fair Play and Georgetown, but only to a four unit per acre density.

To qualify for a mixed-use project, a parcel must be General Plan designated as "Commercial," and must be currently zoned Commercial, Professional Office Commercial or Planned Commercial. No rezoning is required.