

June 16, 2009

To: Humboldt County Planning Commission

Re: General Plan Update, Land Use Element

Dear Commissioners:

Following the town hall meeting of 6/11 and many conversations with fellow southern Humboldters, it seems obvious to me, as it may to you, that the principal concern of many in this rural area is the security of their homes and properties. Finding a way to regularize or legalize longstanding (in both senses) unpermitted homes, resolving issues about shaded parcels, and developing a reasonable, accessible Alternative Owner-Builder policy are urgent matters to these rural dwellers.

I believe that these issues have very little to do with which plan alternative, or combination of plan alternatives, is chosen for the General Plan Update. The General Plan does not go into this level of detail. Much of this should be worked through when the ordinances are written. However, if the County could demonstrate that it's seriously addressing these issues now, after decades of sidestepping, much of the controversy over rural property rights would be resolved, and the rancor would be reduced. Not that we would all agree on the options, but we would be able to enter into a more productive discussion of future land use in rural areas.

First, I suggest that the Land Use element include stronger wording in support of AOB. It should state the intention to review the policies, standards, and administration of the AOB program to bring it up-to-date with new technologies, and to make the permit process less expensive and more user-friendly. Additionally, ALL OPTIONS of the Land Use element should include a new policy expressing the County's intention to work with the community to develop solutions to the problem of older unpermitted buildings and shaded parcels, solutions that will be fair and realistic – and that this process will begin within a defined time frame.

The County could begin implementing a program by establishing something like a blue ribbon commission. This may have to start at the Board of Supervisors' level. Members of this commission, or committee, should include representatives of Planning, Building, Legal, and Environmental Health. The Tax Assessor's office should be asked to assist with parcel definitions and problems involving old deeds, etc. Several members of the rural community should be included as well: individuals who understand the issues and are trusted by residents, but who have specialized knowledge to contribute; for example, contractors who build rural homes and local people with hands-on experience in water issues and restoration. These community members should be willing to work with officials and residents alike to find practical solutions. The committee should be a working group, not simply a sounding board for complaints. I hope the Planning Commission will consider this proposal seriously, recommend it to the Supervisors, and direct Planning staff to put resources into it.

Finally, on a different subject: I was intrigued by Mr. Barnum's presentation of the history of population growth in Humboldt County at the 6/11 town hall meeting. Many people believe that climate change, the internet, and disillusion with urban life will cause a growth surge in our county. On the other hand, I agree with Mr. Barnum that our economic woes, geographical isolation, and long gloomy winters (might get better with climate change, or might get worse!) will continue to deter significant numbers of new

people from moving into Humboldt and will almost certainly drive some current residents out. If this is the more likely scenario, then why do we need to open more resource and open lands for development in this General Plan Update? If we take a conservative approach to development outside serviced areas, provisions in the Governance Element still allow for review and amendment to the General Plan to respond to unexpected changes. Undeveloped land can always be made available for development, but once land is developed it's virtually impossible to return it to its prior state.

Thank you for your consideration.



Virginia Graziani
PO Box 2213/249 Sunset Avenue
Redway

Cc: Supervisor Clif Clendenen
Planning Staff:
Kirk Girard
Tom Hofweber
Martha Spencer