

Fresno County supervisors seek environmental study of general plan

By Marc Benjamin

Fresno County officials said the county's general plan review was a series of grammatical changes and responses to new state rules with no increase in rural land for development.

Fresno County supervisors didn't see it that way and voted to begin the process for an environmental impact report.

After two hours of testimony Tuesday, the review was roundly panned by audience members for taking about six years longer than scheduled and not having enough detail. But they were satisfied by the supervisors' 5-0 decision to seek a more extensive environmental assessment.

A decision still must be made about how detailed an environmental document the county will propose. County staff members said they will return to supervisors with a list of options -- from least detailed to more costly and thorough. The environmental document is not in the county's budget this year and is expected to cost \$100,000 or more.

It will likely take about 18 months to finish, said Bernard Jimenez, deputy director for Fresno County public works and planning department.

None of the proposed changes from the review will go into effect without the environmental impact report.

The review proposed a plan for "health and well-being," promoting community gardens, locally grown agriculture and walkable communities. It also adds a prohibition on new designations of rural residential development by supervisors and a renewed effort to add travel services along Interstate 5 in western Fresno County.

Board members were concerned with many of the issues that have changed in Fresno County, such as the drought and its effects on agriculture, increased land retirement from farming, Kings River gravel mining projects and potential for fracking, after the last county general plan was approved in 2000.

Judy Case McNairy, who is the only member of the board who approved the last general plan, made the motion to support the environmental impact report because of transportation needs and changes the state has pushed on local governments in recent years.

"There are things that have changed the state of development in our county," she said. The state continues to have an effect on local land use decisions, Case McNairy said, adding, "I think it would be in everybody's best interest to pursue an environmental impact report."

Supervisor Phil Larson said the county has a lot of work ahead to assess environmental impacts, but added that places to develop are narrowing.

"How do we make this thing happen so everyone benefits?" Larson asked. "We don't want to develop on the Kings River, we've ruined the San Joaquin River, we don't want to go to Friant Road, we don't want to go to Millerton New Town. Where do we want to go?"

Opponents to the review pointed to 149 proposed revisions to policies in the general plan and they suggested that many of the changes triggered a detailed environmental review.

If supervisors had not supported an environmental impact report, they could have faced a legal challenge, said Fresno lawyer Ashley Werner of the Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability.

The basic environmental report -- a negative declaration -- was not sufficient, she said.

"The initial study is incredibly cursory and has hardly any real analysis at all," she told supervisors. "Since that time, there have been new revisions that could have substantial environmental impacts."

Environmental advocate Radley Reep, one of about two dozen speakers who addressed the board Tuesday, said the county has less water, further deterioration of the inner city, more homeless residents and less agricultural land.

In the review, Reep said, the county didn't provide sensible explanations about ways the revisions will affect residents.

Following the meeting, Reep said environmental advocates will continue watching how the county approaches the environmental review.

"The critical meeting will be the next one (on the general plan) and whether they want to go with a less detailed (supplemental) or full environmental impact report," he said.

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