

Article No. 4

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A Return to Urban Sprawl?

The current 2000-2020 plan directs most new urban development to areas of the county where public facilities and infrastructure already exist. In contrast, the proposed 2020-2040 plan deletes the word “already” from the plan and allows urban development where facilities and infrastructure do not exist but can be provided.

The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research defines general plan policies as specific statements that guide decision-making and help implement the plan’s vision.

Although specificity is an essential element of good land use policy, during the process of updating a general plan, the public’s focus is often on more basic matters such as the community’s future vision and on broad issues related to future development. It is only when land use projects come up for decision later based on adopted policy that the public’s attention shifts to the specifics of individual policies where the wording of a single phrase can make all the difference.

Regarding the possible renewal of urban sprawl, even though the current 2000-2020 plan and the proposed plan for 2020-2040 are alike in their general commitment to protect the rural character of the county, the draft 2020-2040 plan contains small wording changes to policy that may result in sweeping changes for urban land use. Of particular interest are the phrases ***already have, can be provided*** and ***other areas***.

The current 2000-2020 plan and the proposed 2020-2040 plan have two central themes in common: “Urban-Centered Growth” and “Agricultural Land Protection.” With respect to the protection of agricultural land, both plans are alike in their stated commitment to protect farmland as the county’s most valuable natural resource. Both plans contain statements that the County will direct new urban growth to cities and rural communities and will limit incompatible development in agricultural areas. But with respect to urban-centered growth, the two plans differ. The current 2000-2020 plan limits urban growth to areas that already have the facilities and

infrastructure to support such development. The proposed 2020-2040 plan allows development to occur in areas where facilities and services can be provided. The County’s proposed change to text is shown below, with additions underlined and deletions lined through:

Urban Centered Growth

The plan promotes compact growth by directing most new urban development to incorporated cities and existing unincorporated urban communities ~~that already have the infrastructure where public facilities and infrastructure are available or can be provided consistent with the adopted General Plan or Community Plan~~ to accommodate such growth.

Similarly, the draft 2020-2040 plan includes a significant addition to the County’s most fundamental policy on farmland protection — Policy LU-A.1.

Policy LU-A.1 — Agricultural Land Conservation

The County shall maintain agriculturally designated areas for agriculture use and shall direct urban growth away from valuable agricultural lands to cities, unincorporated communities, and other areas planned for such development where public facilities and infrastructure are available or can be provided consistent with the adopted General or Community Plan.

It is clear from the redlined text above that the proposed 2020-2040 plan will allow the County to direct urban growth to areas where facilities and infrastructure do not already exist. Uncertain is the location of such growth. The change in policy will direct urban growth to cities, rural communities and to other areas planned for development. Should this policy change be adopted, the County may be able to redesignate most any parcel of land from agricultural use to urban use and then proceed to provide the necessary facilities and infrastructure.

In addition, the County proposes to delete Program LU-H.B and to amend Policy LU-H.9. These two changes would eliminate the requirement that the County hold meetings each year with the county’s cities and with adjacent counties to address regional planning and growth issues.