

Words can be “Slippery Customers”

“Words have often been called slippery customers, and many scholars have been distressed by their tendency to shift their meanings and slide out from under any simple definition. A goal of some clear thinkers has been to use words in more precise ways.” — William Labov, “The Boundaries of Words and their Meanings” (1973)

In language, pretty much everything is metaphorical. The simplest word taps into a host of complex mental images, and because speaker and listener have different histories, misinterpretation is common. But this is normally not a problem, as gaps in understanding can be resolved through conversation. Not so with the written word. Once the author is out of the picture, there is little opportunity to talk one’s way to understanding, and it is for this reason that long-range plans must be written as precisely as possible.

The meanings of some verbs in the current 2000-2020 General Plan are hard to pin down. Verbs like *ensure*, *consider*, and *encourage* are “slippery customers.” The policies below all contain the word *encourage*. From the text alone, it is impossible to establish how the County might implement these policies. In addition, the criteria by which to judge success cannot be known.

Policy LU-A.18: The County shall **encourage** land improvement programs to increase soil productivity in areas containing lesser quality agricultural soils.

Policy PF-E.22: The County shall **encourage** the local agencies responsible for flood control or storm drainage to control obnoxious odors or mosquito breeding conditions...by appropriate measures.

Policy PF-C.28: The County shall **encourage** agricultural water conservation where economically, environmentally, and technically feasible.

Policy OS-E.4: The County shall **encourage** private landowners to adopt sound wildlife habitat management practices, as recommended by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife....

Policies in the current 2000-2020 General Plan and in the proposed 2020-2040 plan update require the County to “*promote*” various outcomes. Below are two examples.

Policy ED-B.12: The County shall actively **promote** the development of the San Joaquin and Kings Rivers for recreational use and as tourist destination.

Policy HS-B.12: The County shall **promote** installation and maintenance of smoke detectors in existing residences and commercial facilities that were constructed prior to the requirement for their installation.

These policies sound good, but they lack teeth, and there is not enough information to anticipate how the tasks will be accomplished or how progress will be measured.

The word “*generally*” and phrases such as “*to the extent practicable*” are problematic as they imply moderation of the County’s commitment to full implementation.

Policy LU-F.22: The County shall **generally** require that significant new office developments locate near major transportation corridors and concentrations of residential uses.

Policy OS-E.13: The County should protect **to the maximum extent practicable** wetlands...and meadows since they are recognized as essential habitats for birds and wildlife.

The policy above is a good example of what the County could do to strengthen the plan. The phrase “*to the maximum extent practicable*” could be removed and the word “*shall*” could be substituted for the word “*should*,” resulting in the revision shown below.

Policy OS-E.13 (with suggested revisions): The County shall protect wetlands ...and meadows since they are recognized as essential habitats for birds and wildlife.

It is in everyone’s best interest that the process to update the General Plan include broad public discussions of wording changes needed to clarify the degree to which plan policies can and will be implemented.