

Keep It Rural, Calaveras – Why We Formed

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by Lew Mayhew*

Keep It Rural, Calaveras is a grassroots group of about 70 western Calaveras County residents who came together in July out of concern that the proposed Ridge at Trinitas golf resort would change the rural character of our area forever, setting it on an inevitable course to becoming another out-of-place sub-urban island surrounded by agricultural land.

Those living in the area have been shocked by the lack of action by County officials to stop the piecemeal construction and massive alteration of the landscape over a period of years as an illegal 18-hole golf course was constructed on land zoned Agricultural Preserve. Many County, State and Federal laws were ignored by the developer and not enforced by those with the responsibility to do so. This led many to the reluctant conclusion that our County government had failed and we needed to organize to respond effectively.

We began meeting in July when the Draft Environmental Impact Report on *the rest of the Trinitas project* was released for Public Comment. It was “speak now, or forever hold your peace” time.

In addition to the golf cart paths, greens and ninety-plus million gallons of ground water use per year, we learned the developer wanted to build a 30-unit motel/lodge/spa, a clubhouse/bar/restaurant with banquet facilities & retail shop, a driving range, snack shop, five acres of lighted parking lots, plus 13 new homes in a gated community with street lights. All this just off a narrow rural road surrounded by large tracts of ranchland and five- to fifty-acre residential properties. The developer proposes golf tournaments and training camps, amplified music and a public address system. In one newspaper article, he even discussed plans for a “stadium seating hundreds.” (*Stockton Record 1/30/2006*). Sound rural to you?

The traffic, noise and lights would make a misery of working the surrounding ranches. It would also impact and drag traffic through many long established rural residential areas. It would overtax the already crumbling, narrow, hilly roads with blind curves that provide the only access to the project site. This is the kind of unplanned, zone changing, hopscotch development that leads to the destruction of the natural beauty of an area.

With help from a local land use attorney, we analyzed the DEIR, and took issue with its developer bias and deficient analysis of the project’s impacts. For example, over forty surrounding wells that we know of have developed problems since the developer started irrigating his greens. A crucial part of the hydrological analysis was based on a theory that the aquifer under the golf course was not used by other wells in the surrounding area. Testing should have been done, but was not, to see if golf course irrigation was affecting surrounding wells.

In addition to groundwater we found the EIR failed to recognize or underestimated the project’s impact on traffic and roads, agricultural and farming activities, noise and aesthetics and

its growth-inducing nature, and failed to look at its cumulative impact in context of other approved or planned area developments currently in the pipeline.

We submitted a significant volume of thoughtful comments by the August 27 deadline, which helped persuade the Planning Commission to delay indefinitely the scheduled September 20 hearing on the DEIR's merits and deficiencies.

Now, in order to respond to the comments received, the County is planning to rehire a Sacramento consulting firm, the same one that reviewed and approved the original flawed EIR. Our group, Keep It Rural, Calaveras is acting as a watchdog on this process as well as keeping decision makers informed of on going unpermitted activity on the golf course.

At long last the County Supervisors seem to be aware and focusing on the matter. On November 6th, they will decide whether the EIR should have considered the environmental impact of building the 18-hole golf course. We hope to get a new "baseline" set, and from that starting point see a Final EIR with an unbiased and objective analysis of the entire project's impacts. We think it will show decision makers that the project is out of place and should be built closer to a city that wants it and can supply surface water for its operation.

Calaveras and other rural counties are going through growing pains as they learn to cope with the pressure to develop and rezone upon request. To their credit, the Calaveras County Supervisors are leading the way to better planning by encouraging the general plan and building code rewrites. And provided they can do it in a timely way they seem to have given our citizens in unincorporated cities the opportunity to develop their own growth plan to become a part of the new general plan.

Calaveras County is fortunate that many citizens are involved and understand what is at stake. If we have development as usual, over time we will end up as a planning commissioner from a well known southern California county recently said of his county: "well we screwed up 90% of it; let's see if we can get the last ten percent right."

With a sound general plan and building code, the future for this historic and naturally beautiful county looks bright. Development will come, and should flow into areas properly defined by the general plan.

Three other ingredients are necessary. 1) Elected county leaders who will uphold the zoning of the plan, not cave in at every turn and allow out-of-place developments to redefine an area. 2) Paid county officials who will do their jobs in enforcing the law equally. 3) the crucial ingredient is an alert and informed electorate, who will elect those wise and disciplined leaders.

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