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Front Page Story

HELP wants to stop General Plan update

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The county's General Plan update process continues to meet opposition from developers and Realtors groups that are demanding it be stopped until alleged problems with an infrastructure report are corrected.

The update maps development to the year 2020 and is already three years behind schedule. Water and sewer infrastructure is directly related to development capacity and at the Thursday, Jan. 31, county Planning Commission meeting, homebuilders and Realtors representatives called for a halt to the update so it won't be polluted by

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an allegedly misleading infrastructure report. That document was drafted by the Eureka-based Winzler and Kelly firm, and the HELP developers advocacy group is aggressively challenging it. A national engineering firm, HDR, was enlisted by HELP to scrutinize the infrastructure report and Kay Backer, HELP's consultant, said it was found to be highly flawed.

"It's essential, in our opinion, that the General Plan update process be suspended until we know what the current status of

our infrastructure is – and right now, we don't," Backer told commissioners. She described HDR's findings, saying the firm deemed the county's report to be "confusing" and "lacking in sound planning assumptions," with "overstated development projections" and being "void of the necessary information from which policy decisions can be made."

Backer also reiterated a long-held criticism – that the county's estimate of land suitable for development is "grossly overstated" and housing needs won't be met if it's not re-adjusted.

Tina Christensen of the Humboldt Association of Realtors also cited the HDR review and reinforced her group's criticism of the county's land estimate. "We continue to contend that the county has failed to develop a dependably accurate picture of how much land is realistically available for development," she said.

The question of extending development into new areas is the update's most-debated issue. If land is subtracted from the coun-

ty's development estimates, new areas will have to be found to replace it to demonstrate housing capacity. And the county's priority is to include land that is within existing urban service borders.

Some have doubts about the compact growth strategy's ability to deliver enough housing. Land-intensive single family housing and low density rural housing can be accommodated by extending urban service boundaries, but there is a lot of opposition to that.

And Ann Lindsay, the county's health officer, warned commissioners that if they choose to support those extensions, they'll do so at the expense of community health. "With sprawling development, people walk less in their leisure time and are more likely to have high blood pressure and to be overweight," she said, adding that public transportation also promotes walking. "So you planning commissioners are actually public health practitioners, and you have a major role in preventing chronic disease in our community."

But Victoria Copeland, also representing the Realtors Association, said the "smart growth" principles that influenced the McKinleyville Community Plan shouldn't be used as a countywide model in the update's Community Design Element.

"Smart growth tends to be one-size-fits-all formula design and is also heavy on urban design," she continued. "We are a rural, low-population county and we believe smart growth doesn't necessary fit us here."

And Julie Williams of the Northern California Association of Homebuilders questioned why a Community Design Element is needed at all. "We would like to see that whole element go bye-bye," she said. "We think it's representative of social engineering."

Williams also asked that the update be halted so the infrastructure report can be re-drafted. Commissioners didn't comment on the calls for stopping the update, but they may when the hearing continues on Feb. 21.