

GPU5 housing plan challenged

Carmel Valley: Group says affordable areas unnecessary

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Affordable housing areas proposed for Carmel Valley represent "serious deficiencies" that "betray the democratically-expressed wishes" of the community, the Carmel Valley Association president said in a letter to county officials.

The letter from Glenn Robinson to Planning Commission Chairman Don Rochester challenged proposals by a commission subcommittee updating the county's general plan. The update is known as GPU5.

Robinson said the size and scope of two recommended Carmel Valley affordable housing areas — included in so-called "overlays" in the subcommittee's report — "cannot be justified by logic or facts on the ground."

Robinson indicated in his letter that the association's members don't believe Carmel Valley needs the amount of affordable housing the overlays would allow because most area employees already live nearby and it would lead to unacceptable degradation of roads and traffic in the area.

He added that the recommendations should be in line with the results of the June election in which Carmel voters overwhelmingly backed the more growth-restrictive Measure A and rejected the supervisor-approved GPU4.

"I see no logical reason for such a formula for significant growth in Carmel Valley given the serious water and traffic constraints we have," Robinson wrote in an e-mail to The Herald. He suggested that a smaller overlay would be more appropriate.

But Planning Commissioner Nancy Isakson, a subcommittee member, and affordable housing developer Alfred Diaz-Infante, executive director of the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, argued that Carmel Valley needs plenty of affordable housing and the traffic situation could improve if fewer people have to commute to the area.

"Certainly, affordable housing is needed in Carmel Valley," Isakson said. "I think they need affordable housing in Carmel Valley more than they admit."

"We see (the overlays) as an opportunity," Diaz-Infante said. "For the next 20 years, this allows the opportunity to build affordable housing where traditionally affordable housing hasn't been built."

Today, the Planning Commission is set to review the subcommittee's recommendation for the latest revision of the county's general plan update, known as GPU5, which will govern rural growth for the next quarter century. The review is set for 10:30 a.m. and will include time for public comment.

The recommendation designates areas where growth would be encouraged, suggests how development would be regulated and identifies areas where affordable housing could be located, called overlays.

The disputed overlays are near the mouth of the Carmel Valley, on about 150 acres along Carmel Valley Road east of Highway 1, and in Mid-Valley, on about 40 acres near the intersection of Carmel Valley Road and Robinson Canyon Road.

The subcommittee recommended two affordable housing overlays along Monterey-Salinas Highway, including a site near the Monterey Peninsula Airport near Olmsted Road and another at Reservation Road.

In his letter, Robinson wrote that such an increase in housing in Carmel Valley during a time of "virtually no population growth" in the area makes no sense.

He pointed to census data that he said show the "vast majority" of employees on the Peninsula already live there and that more people commute out than commute in. He said the Mid-Valley overlay is "especially perplexing" because of the relatively few service-sector jobs located there that employ people seeking local housing.

Robinson said the CVA and Carmel Valley residents in general "have a long history of support for affordable housing," pointing to 400 affordable housing units in the area, including the Rippling River public housing project that attracted the association's support.

Robinson said the CVA is recommending that a smaller, alternative affordable housing overlay be located in a commercial area near the mouth of the valley between Highway 1 and Carmel Rancho. The organization wants local workers, such as teachers, firefighters and police, to be given first crack at the housing, he wrote.

Finally, according to the letter, the CVA wants the valley to be "treated equally" with the Pajaro community area and wants to be assured that no new development occur until "serious flood protection measures" have been implemented.

Margaret Robbins, a CVA board member, said there is room for affordable housing in the valley, but she suggested that focusing on infill and commercial space conversion would be a better approach.

Isakson said the need for affordable housing in Monterey County is so great that even some traffic impact is an acceptable "trade-off."

Planning Commissioner Martha Diehl, a subcommittee member who represents Carmel Valley, said she disputed some of the CVA's projections and argued that the subcommittee had fully investigated all its recommendations, including the overlays.

"This wasn't just randomly throwing things against the wall," Diehl said, adding that she believes there is room for debate on the details. "I've got no problem with (discussing the details). Everything I've seen so far is around the fringes of the debate."

Other organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, LandWatch Monterey County and the Refinement Group, are expected to weigh in on the subcommittee's recommendation.

Janet Brennan of the league said the organization will provide a comparison between its original GPU5 recommendation and the subcommittee's report. She said the league will also ask the Planning Commission to

hold another public hearing to allow the public an opportunity to comment.

LandWatch's Chris Fitz has suggested the recommendation needs stronger restrictions on growth outside designated growth areas, and indicated that he believes the supervisors may be more open to a compromise that better represents the "middle ground."

The Refinement Group met Monday at Scheid Vineyards in Salinas, and its members are planning to comment at this morning's meeting, said Tom Carvey, executive director of Common Ground. Carvey said the organization wouldn't have a formal response to the report, but he complimented the subcommittee's work and said the group's members would fully participate in the public review process.

The CVA's top officials, including Robinson, are out of town and won't attend today's public hearing, but Robbins plans to speak.

After the meeting, the Planning Commission is expected to forward its recommendation to the Board of Supervisors for review on Sept. 18. After a 90-day consultation period and environmental review, the Planning Commission would conduct its final hearings in February, and the supervisors would hold their final hearings in March.

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