

'Clustered housing' policy OK'd for farm land

By Cheyenne Cary

November 10th, 2010

Enterprise correspondent

WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors agreed Tuesday to allow farmers to take advantage of a new zoning tool. Called “clustered housing,” the policy is one of many that emerged from the county's General Plan, which aims to protect and preserve Yolo's agricultural land.

Using clustered housing, county planners hope to counteract the growing trend of landowners selling isolated homes on large plots of land to people who don't intend to be farmers. This often results in the surrounding acres of arable land falling into disuse.

“The fear is that economies are such in Yolo that people buy 80 acres with no intent to farm,” said Supervisor Matt Rexroad. “Instead, farmers could sell smaller parcels and place the rest of their land into a conservation easement.”

The plan was perhaps best illustrated in a presentation by county staff. One slide showed an aerial view of land near County Road 98 under current parcel lines, where each of the nine parcels of 10 to 90 acres had a single house in the dead center. A second slide contrasted this setup with nine 2 1/2-acre ranchettes lined up along Road 98, with a large swath of farmland beyond placed into an easement.

After nearly an hour of public comment, the policy was approved by a 4-1 vote, with Supervisor Duane Chamberlain dissenting. Many speakers had concerns about clustered housing potentially being an invitation for development.

“We don't want this to become a playground for developers,” said Yvonne Le Maitre, a longtime Yolo landowner. “Houses grouped like this could become a real burden on the agricultural community.”

Others thought the policy would result in extra costs for farmers seeking to subdivide and sell. Tom Barth of the Yolo County Landowners Association, said there is a risk for “quite a bit more cost” for applicants for rezoning, from hiring engineers and surveyors and conducting an environmental assessment.

Supervisors countered this reasoning by saying the program is voluntary, and that only a selection of farmers would apply to develop their land in this way. Supervisor Mike McGowan said this would be “about 15 percent” of farmland, and that ultimately the 2 1/2-acre ranchettes would reduce the number of developed acres as a trade-off.

“Selling just one of these ranchettes would save enough land to cover the others,” he said. “(Selling isolated homes) would be death by a thousand little razor cuts.”

Each ranchette parcel would be surrounded by an agricultural buffer to insulate residents from the environmental annoyances that come with agriculture. These buffers are outlined in the General Plan — 300 feet for larger parcels and 100 feet for smaller, to the extent feasible.

Some landowners expressed doubt that these buffers would work as a measure to help foster a friendly relationship between farmers and nearby neighbors.

“It doesn't matter if we're 500 feet away or 1,000 feet away, they'd still object to our farming practices,” Le Maitre said.

The clustered housing program will expire in four years if it is not renewed. This component of the measure proved essential when it came to addressing opposition from landowners and ultimately securing the supervisors' votes.

“It was a close vote for me,” Supervisor Jim Provenza said after the meeting. “The opposition presented a lot of valid concerns, but the four-year sunset will allow us to see what works and what doesn't. That was enough of a comfort zone for me.”

Provenza also said he believes estimates of farmer interest in ranchette sales were overstated.

“Clustered housing isn't going to work in a lot of places,” he said. “I think the 15 percent estimate is on the high end.”

Overall, the board faced difficulties in satisfying landowners' concerns about the measure. One property owner, however, voiced his support.

“I support this measure, and I guess I'm standing alone up here,” said Clarence van Hook of Capay.

Van Hook gave up his job as a “fairly successful contractor” to seek out a life farming in the Capay Valley.

“I was looking for 5 to 10 acres, and I found this beautiful ranch that was 219,” he said. “I talked to my wife and pastor about it, and I decided it was for me.”

Hook had some difficulty with Williamson Act restrictions as he tried to develop and sell his large subdivisions.

“I need help with the land. What am I to do?” he asked, adding, “This act is voluntary, and the Williamson Act I never volunteered for.”