



AMADOR CITIZENS
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Update on Amador County's General Plan process

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It has now been 2 months since I first came on board with Amador Citizens to help with Amador County's General Plan Update and "geared up" for the County's September 27 Saturday workshop. The Foothill Conservancy made a significant effort to pack the room with their supporters to make sure the "votes" went their way. The County staff and the consultant used this day to throw out some ideas and see what kind of responses the crowd would have.

What we learned was the basic structure the County staff had in mind for both the plan and the decision making process. Neither was especially comforting.

Subsequent discussions including members of Amador Citizens and myself and decision makers, including members of both the Planning Commission and Board members, revealed that the decision makers were as concerned as we were on many issues. We have provided significant input. Much progress has been made.

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There have been 5 days of joint "hearings" with the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. There was one discussion last Tuesday at the Planning Commission that was useful. These hearings were the first opportunity for the Board of Supervisors or Planning Commissioners to comment formally on the General Plan. Clearly, many of the things we are concerned about were exactly the same concerns Board Members already knew about. Amador County's leadership is pointed in the right direction.

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The hearings have now concluded. The staff was initially hoping to get through that process with a definition of a "Preferred Alternative" map and direction to prepare the draft document and draft environmental document. Whether the Board of Supervisors was ever prepared to do that is somewhat irrelevant. What is

important is that we now have a new process that can be successful. How successful it will be is somewhat up to us.

What is now understood is that the Foothill Conservancy and others of like mind blustered their way through the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) in a way that resulted in many policy direction statements that needed to be changed to make the new General Plan less burdensome to the public. This was not a result of poor representation on the part of Amador County but more because the personal beliefs of the consultant mimic more of what the Foothill Conservancy believes than what the citizens of Amador County believe. Fortunately, your elected officials are not easily misled.

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There are some major structural and policy issues that need to be resolved before the actual preparation of a Draft General Plan should be attempted. There are a few issues that were directed to the Planning Commission for additional discussion. It is presumed that “something” will come back to the Board of Supervisors in February (now scheduled for Feb 17, 18, and 19 from Noon to 5:00 pm). I personally think that is a good idea. I believe my perception of what will be ready for discussion differs markedly with the staff’s wishes.

The Foothill Conservancy got much of what they wanted out of the GPAC process; probably in large part because GPAC members never actually voted on anything which left the consultant free to represent their policies as if GPAC had actually endorsed them. The Conservancy seems to hold in high regard both the staff’s and the consultant’s version of what was accomplished. The staff has supported this, arguably due to the fact that this approach would appear to result in a relatively inexpensive process. We will stick to that interpretation of the reason for staff’s support for this approach, giving them the benefit of the doubt.

Amador Citizens’ role in the future process is to supply the supporting documentation to allow the Board of Supervisors to make the changes that need to be made to arrive at a successful General Plan. Foothill will work very hard to blunt this effort but they will be unsuccessful. Although their incessant arguments can be very compelling, they do not have the facts on their side. They will insist to the end that Federal classification of the Mokelumne River as “Wild & Scenic” (W&S) will not cause a reduction in Amador’s ability to have consumptive water, yet their website insists that the designation will block East Bay Municipal Utility District from getting water. They somehow are able to take both positions with a straight face. Be aware that W&S designation is designed

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specifically to block water and power development. The Foothill Conservancy not only understands this fact—they worship it. They cleverly point out that the designation will not alter the ability to divert the water that Amador currently has a right to use. Alright, but use of Amador’s existing water right isn’t the question, is it! The question is: How does Amador get more water once the existing water right is used up?

The Conservancy is pushing for a “water element” and has convinced some of the Supervisors that this is a good idea. One of the members talked about how important future water was and how a water element might be a useful approach. He wants to cooperate with Calaveras County on the issue. Somehow it never has been pointed out to anyone that the Calaveras water element has nothing to do with future consumptive water. I attended a workshop in Murphy’s put on by the Sierra Nevada Alliance and the Local Government Commission on the Calaveras Water Element and was both amused and appalled at the discussion. What is included is every “lefty” idea of new regulatory control and no discussion or support for developing new water supplies. In fact, the approach is to list all the reasons why developing new supplies is a bad thing! Factually, Calaveras is in pretty good shape as far as water rights are concerned. Amador County is not quite as favorably positioned. Amador is going to have to obtain additional consumptive water to grow much beyond 2030.

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One of the positions we championed at the hearings, along with the Amador County Business Council, was to support an Economic Development Element and that a subset of that element should include Agricultural policies that are more aligned with considering Agriculture as an important economic industry that is deserving of protection and enhancement. It remains, for those that are interested, to work on developing this policy direction. Much of the existing proposed Ag policies revolve around saving Ag as other people’s “open space.” Perhaps water development needs to be discussed as a part of the Economic Development Element.

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A major missing component of the eventual General Plan is the circulation element that is being worked on by the Amador County Transportation Commission. They have been using a modeling program called UPLAN that purports to help determine where growth should occur and where it might be too expensive to supply necessary road infrastructure. Assuming UPLAN will produce quality data, this information is needed to arrive at decisions as to the final mapping.

There will need to be some basic issues resolved with respect to process and policy. I believe that there can be a basic direction from the Board of Supervisors that properties will not be down-zoned. That means different things to different people. It does not mean that future designations will allow all the range of uses that are currently “allowed”. The Board has approved reductions in some current designations, but only where it has been shown that the development at current designations would not be possible. I am sure many of the property owners directly involved might disagree, but in fact they have not lost anything they actually could have developed. These battles are not worth fighting if in fact no actual project could have occurred anyway.

We need to know how the input needs to be developed in order to be effective. Does the County want written position papers or verbal discussions? How is Amador County going to decide what it wishes to expend effort fighting for? We know with some precision what the Foothill Conservancy wants. They want the maximum control of individual uses and a maximum of uses structured as urban projects.

This would result theoretically in walkable communities supported by public transportation and discouraging automobile-dependent development patterns. Basically, for Foothill Conservancy “urban is good and rural is bad”—but how they reconcile this with their mantra of “protecting the rural atmosphere” must be known only to them.

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