Los Angeles County
Department of Regional Planning

Planning for the Challenges Ahead

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June 09, 2009

TO: Supervisor Don Knabe, Chairman
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: Jon Sanabria
Acting Director of Planning

SUBJECT: QUARTERLY STATUS REPORT ON BOARD MOTION REGARDING RURAL ISSUES AND THE GENERAL PLAN UPDATE (December 9, 2008, Item 39-B)

On December 9, 2008 your Board instructed the Director of Planning to take the following actions:

1. Formulate draft standards for development of rural communities within the General Plan Update;
2. Identify provisions that relate to development of rural communities in future outreach efforts concerning the General Plan Update;
3. Make a presentation to the Association of Rural Town Councils no later than April of 2009 concerning rural issues and the General Plan Update; and,
4. Report back to the Board of Supervisors every 90 days identifying how the Department is addressing rural issues in the General Plan Update.

This is the second quarterly status report as directed by your Board motion, and summarizes the progress the Department of Regional Planning (Department) has made in addressing the actions outlined above.

OVERVIEW

The Draft General Plan, when adopted, will serve as the foundation countywide policy document that guides long range development. It addresses multiple and complex issues such as land use, mobility, preservation of open space, water availability, natural resource protection, hazards, infrastructure adequacy, housing, climate change, and livability that all residents face. In particular, the Draft General Plan has been prepared

and revised to ensure that it establishes the countywide framework for the protection of rural communities and supports the further clarification of rural protection in local plans such as the update of the Antelope Valley Area Plan.

RURAL OUTREACH SUMMARY

Heightened attention to rural issues has been underway for the past 18 months with outreach from General Plan staff as well as from the concerted efforts of Department staff through Town & County, the update to the Antelope Valley Area Plan. Throughout the General Plan Update process staff has conducted numerous outreach activities across the County to gather public feedback that provided the basis for the goals and policies found in the Draft General Plan. A majority of these outreach activities have been held in north Los Angeles County such as events held in rural areas to specifically discuss expansions and modifications to the Significant Ecological Areas (SEA) Program.

Since the General Plan Update Program started, staff has worked diligently to address and incorporate all of the public comments that have been received. This work has included the analysis and incorporation of hundreds of written comments from across the County, including those from rural Town Councils, various stakeholders such as the Los Angeles County Farm Bureau and the Antelope Valley Conservancy, and individual residents in north Los Angeles County. The culmination of these outreach activities was the release of the Preliminary Draft General Plan in August 2007, and the Draft General Plan in July 2008.

As part of the 2008 Draft General Plan outreach strategy, General Plan staff met with rural residents from north Los Angeles County on several occasions, including:

- October 20, 2008 – Acton Town Council (24 attendees)
- October 30, 2008 – Association of Rural Town Councils (36 attendees)
- January 28, 2009 – Los Angeles County Farm Bureau (with Executive Director)
- February 2, 2009 – Acton Town Council (74 attendees)
- February 18, 2009 – Association of Rural Town Councils (11 attendees)
- March 26, 2009 – Association of Rural Town Councils (27 attendees)
- May 28, 2009 – Association of Rural Town Councils (30 attendees)

In addition to the these meetings, General Plan staff initiated discussions with several north Los Angeles County rural residents regarding the Draft General Plan and how it may affect rural character and rural lifestyles. Staff met with a member of the Acton Town Council on October 23, 2008 at the Regional Planning offices and again with this member and another member of the Acton Town Council on February 2, 2009.

Also, the Association of Rural Town Councils very graciously offered to host tours of rural communities for General Plan staff to assist them in gaining a fuller understanding of the unique issues facing these diverse communities. The tours were conducted over

eight weeks from March 16 to May 11, 2009. The following is the full list of rural tours conducted and the hosts who led them. These hosts were officials from rural town councils who took time from their busy weekday work schedules and used their personal vehicles to provide General Plan staff with insightful rural tours.

- March 16, 2009 – Littlerock, Sun Village, and Juniper Hills
  (Patrick Hough, James Brooks, Vance Pomeroy, Don Pierce)
- March 30, 2009 – Lake Los Angeles and Roosevelt
  (Debi Breul, Sue Riebe, Cole McCandless, Ron Ferrell, Barbara Firsick)
- April 27, 2009 – Agua Dulce and Acton
  (Mary Johnson, Annette Fortuna, Jacki Ayer, Dick Morris, Jim Connelly)
- May 4, 2009 – Quartz Hill and Antelope Acres
  (Doug Burgis, Pat Hartford, Vicki Nelson)
- May 11, 2009 – Leona Valley, Green Valley, Lakes, Three Points/Liebre Mountain
  (Alice Benoit, Karen Bryan, Laura Vernetti, Lu Bole, Jim Walker, Susan Zahnter)

On March 26, 2009 General Plan staff made a presentation to the Association of Rural Town Councils identifying the primary policy issues that rural residents have regarding the Draft General Plan as well as the characteristics of rural living that they value. Also presented were revisions to the Draft General Plan Land Use Element to address rural issues including a new rural-specific land use goal, new rural-specific policies and implementation actions.

Following the rural tours General Plan staff made a presentation to the Association of Rural Town Councils on May 28, 2009 to review what had been learned and to revisit the rural-specific revisions to the Draft General Plan Land Use Element.

RURAL POLICY ISSUES AND VALUED CHARACTERISTICS

The primary policy issues that have been noted by rural residents that relate to the Draft General Plan include:

- Lack of attention to rural community needs in the Draft General Plan;
- Lack of discrete policy language in the Draft General Plan to protect rural communities from urban encroachment or other incompatible development;
- The feeling that smart growth principles are not compatible with rural lifestyles; and,
- The appropriateness of agricultural land uses within the established rural character of the Antelope Valley.

The rural characteristics valued by residents include:

- Living in a low density environment without high intensity land uses, such as regional commercial centers;
- A natural, peaceful, quiet setting, with the ability to find a sense of solitude;
- Views of adjacent natural areas, such as hillsides and ridgelines by day, and views of starry skies by night;
- Agricultural and equestrian uses that are sensitive to the land; and,
- An absence of infrastructure generally found in urban and suburban areas, including but not limited to curbs, gutters, sidewalks, street lighting, and traffic signals.

OUTCOMES FROM RURAL TOURS

More than a dozen rural communities and their surrounding environs were visited in north Los Angeles County. General Plan staff saw firsthand the diversity of rural communities and their unique cultures. Each community had its own special character, yet they all had similar rural concerns or values such as preference for large lots with "elbow room"; the right to use their land for agricultural and equestrian activities; natural amenities and their preservation; limited and appropriate commercial development; threat of urban encroachment; and landscape degradation by power transmission lines.

The rural tours clearly demonstrated that north Los Angeles County is comprised of a vast array of rural communities with diverse characteristics and lifestyles, but with common interests focused around a vital sense of community among residents and very strong desire to maintain the rural integrity of their communities and surroundings.

Rural residents' strong sense of community and "look out for each other" attitude was dramatically shown during the late 2008 snowstorm that blanketed north Los Angeles County. Tale after tale was recalled about how neighbors checked on and helped each other while snowed in. Similar tales of community unity were told regarding evacuations during wildfires and opposition to unwanted land developments.

Rural residents view rural land use as dispersed, spread out with appropriate activities to support a small number of inhabitants. Viewed this way, rural residents believe that rural areas could be seen as buffers to urban development, keeping it directed toward established urban areas with appropriate infrastructure.

REVISIONS TO THE DRAFT GENERAL PLAN TO ADDRESS RURAL ISSUES

Based on these rural outreach activities, several revisions have been made to the General Plan. The input from rural residents and the outcomes from the rural tours helped to inform and guide revisions in the Draft General Plan to address rural issues. These include the Draft General Plan Land Use Legend; text in the Draft General Plan Foreword, and Introduction and Background chapters; a full page "spotlight" on rural

living and smart growth in the Land Use Element; and a rural-specific goal, policies, and implementation actions

Draft General Plan Land Use Legend

The Draft General Plan Land Use Legend is comprehensive in establishing a wide range of seven Rural Land (RL) categories with densities of 1du/1ac to 1du/80ac with the intended uses being:

- Single family homes, rural, equestrian, agricultural and other related activities, and local serving, ancillary commercial uses.

The purpose of lands designated as RL is to maintain the character of low intensity uses and ensure the compatibility of new development in the small communities and rural areas of the County. The residential densities vary and are based on site restrictions (environmental, hillside management, and sufficient services and infrastructure), compatibility with the existing development pattern, and applicable zoning requirements.

Other land use categories in the Draft General Plan Land Use Legend that focus on the uniqueness of rural lifestyles are Rural Commercial (CR) and Rural Industrial (IR). The intended uses of CR:

- Provides sites for commercial and personal services compatible with agricultural, rural and recreational activities.

The purpose of lands designated as CR is to serve areas that are sparsely populated or rural in nature. Rural Commercial uses are limited in scope and intensity and exist to meet the needs of residents in rural areas. These uses must maintain compatibility with existing rural development patterns.

The intended uses of IR:

- Provides sites for industrial uses compatible with agricultural and rural activities.

The purpose of lands designated as IR is to serve areas that are sparsely populated or rural in nature. Rural Industrial uses exist to meet the needs of residents in rural areas and are limited in scope and intensity due to such factors as lack of public services or infrastructure, in compatible adjacent land uses, or environmental impacts. These uses must maintain compatibility with existing rural development patterns.

An Agriculture (AG) land use category has also been established in the Draft General Plan Land Use Legend to allow for the identification and establishment of areas suitable for agricultural uses, agricultural production, and associated housing for permanent and temporary farmworkers. While lands designated as AG are intended only for agricultural activities, the category does not preclude appropriate agricultural activities in any of the RL designations.

Draft General Plan Foreword

The Draft General Plan Foreword describes the Antelope Valley as "a series of small communities that cherish their status as the last places in Los Angeles County where one can live the rural life", and specifically calls out Acton as a representation of County rural life, where "low density development is the norm" and whose identity is defined by enforcing rural standards.

Draft General Plan Introduction Chapter

The Draft General Plan Introduction Chapter outlines the top issues that County residents felt were important topics to be addressed in the General Plan. One of the top priorities in this section is to "Protect Rural Communities and Rural Lifestyles", and to maintain the unique character and development patterns of unincorporated rural communities.

Draft General Plan Background Chapter

The Draft General Plan Background Chapter provides a summary of the defining characteristics of each region of the unincorporated County. For northern Los Angeles County, the Antelope Valley region is described as an area where residents "value the rural nature of their communities".

Rural Living and Smart Growth

The Draft General Plan promotes smart growth practices, in part mandated by several laws that have been recently passed by the California State Legislature that require jurisdictions to plan for greenhouse gas reductions through land use policies. The Draft General Plan has been carefully structured to ensure that the County's land use policies are employed strategically to direct the majority of future growth away from rural areas and into suburban and urban areas with greater access to infrastructure, mass transit, and regional commercial centers.

Rural Goal, Policies and Implementation Actions

The following Land Use Element goal, policies and implementation actions were prepared for the Draft General Plan to address the needs of the County's rural residents.

- Goal LU-6 – Preservation and enhancement of rural areas and rural communities.

- Policy LU 6.1 – Protect the character of the County's rural areas and the way of life that distinguishes them from urban and suburban areas.
- Policy LU 6.2 – Ensure compatibility of future growth in rural areas with the existing development pattern, including prevailing density, intensity, and infrastructure service standards.

- Policy LU 6.3 – Utilize natural landforms and environmentally sensitive areas to create buffers between rural communities, or between rural areas and adjacent urban and suburban areas.
- Policy LU 6.4 – Encourage a mix of uses in rural areas, including residences, agriculture, animal keeping and equestrian uses, community services, and local-serving businesses and industries.
- Policy LU 6.5 – Promote the maintenance and expansion of local services, including but not limited to local-serving businesses and home-based businesses, libraries, and health clinics, to decrease vehicle travel and commuting and to make rural communities more self-sufficient.
- Policy M 2.3 – In rural areas, require rural highway and street standards that minimize the width of paving and the placement of curbs, gutters, sidewalks, street lighting, and traffic signals, as adopted and maintained by the Department of Public Works.

- Action LU 24 – Initiate the Community-Based Planning Program, and ensure that rural development guidelines, including standards to determine compatibility, are provided in community-based plans as necessary.
- Action LU 25 – Complete Town & Country, the update to the Antelope Valley Area Plan, with goals, policies, and rural development guidelines, including standards to determine compatibility, for the Valley as a whole and for each distinct rural community.

SUMMARY

The extensive outreach to rural residents conducted by General Plan staff was greatly facilitated by the generosity of the Association of Rural Town Councils to host rural tours. These tours provided valuable insights to General Plan staff about rural issues. The hospitality of the tour hosts and their local knowledge demonstrated a genuine community spirit concerned about rural ways of life and a strong commitment to their preservation. The insights gained from the in-depth outreach with rural residents have contributed to a better understanding of rural issues in the General Plan Update and have helped to shape the Draft General Plan as a foundation policy document that will be consistent with the rural focus of the update to the Antelope Valley Area Plan.

Staff will continue to reach out to rural residents as the General Plan Update continues. As instructed by your Board, future outreach efforts will clarify the unique role that rural communities have played in the development of the Draft General Plan. The next quarterly report on rural issues and the General Plan Update will be delivered on September 8, 2009.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me or Mark Herwick of my staff at (213) 974-6427 or by email at mherwick@planning.lacounty.gov. Our office hours are 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. We are closed on Fridays.

JS:RCH:MSH

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