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Placer OKs 14,000 homes

By Mary Lynne Vellinga and Art Campos - Bee Staff Writers
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Placer County supervisors Monday approved a development the size of a small city just north of the Sacramento County line.

The Placer Vineyards project -- in the works for the past 13 years -- is the largest development ever approved for the unincorporated portion of Placer County, and one of the largest ever approved in the region.

It will bring 14,132 houses to a rectangular swath of 5,230 acres of farmland west of Roseville. About 32,800 new residents are expected in the development, which will be built over 20 to 30 years.

The unanimous vote on Placer Vineyards was a setback to the voluntary "Blueprint" regional growth plan adopted by the member governments of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments in 2004.

The idea behind Blueprint was to pack more people into areas earmarked for growth, making it more efficient to serve them with public transit and reducing the need to build on more farmland over the next half century.

In this case, however, the Blueprint concept lost amid community concerns about traffic.

The Placer supervisors opted instead for a plan containing fairly typical suburban densities for single family homes. SACOG had advocated an alternative with 21,631 residential units.

"There was just an obvious concern about additional traffic," said Doug Elmets, a spokesman for the 21 different property owners involved in the Placer Vineyards plan.

Supervisor F.C. "Rocky" Rockholm said pursuing the Blueprint alternative would have added further study time and delayed construction.

"We can move forward today," Rockholm said. "Thirteen-plus years (of planning) is enough."

Other supervisors said they might have voted for the Blueprint plan, but instead would defer to Rockholm, who represents that area.

SACOG Executive Director Mike McKeever was out of town Monday and could not be reached for comment. But he has previously said that he viewed the Placer Vineyards vote as an important one in predicting the success of the voluntary Blueprint plan on the ground.

McKeever sent a letter on July 9 emphasizing the benefits that he said the county would realize by adopting the alternative favored by his staff. "Building 7,000 fewer homes in Placer Vineyards means they will be built someplace else," McKeever wrote. "They will not just disappear."

He went on to predict that opting for a less-dense option in Placer Vineyards would result in more long-distance commuting.

Situated in the southwest corner of Placer County, the Placer Vineyards area was earmarked for growth in the county's 1994 general plan.

The project is bounded by Baseline Road on the north, the Sacramento County border on the south, the Sutter County line on the west and by Walerga Road and Dry Creek on the east.

Two town centers are planned -- one at Watt Avenue and Baseline Road and the other at Watt Avenue and the future East Town Center Drive.

In addition, the project will include 48 miles of recreational trails, 210 acres of parks and 709 acres of open space.

Stretches of Baseline Road and Watt Avenue that fall within the project each will be expanded from their current two lanes to six lanes.

Other amenities include a bus transit system, a transit center, a county corporation yard, an aquatics center, a youth center, a library, 11 church sites, water infrastructure, two fire stations, a sheriff's substation, a high school, two middle schools and six elementary schools.

"It's going to be a very well-planned community," said Kent MacDiarmid, project manager for Placer Vineyards. "The people who will live in this community will be very proud."

He said the town center -- with restaurants, theaters and a civic center -- will give residents an opportunity to walk to and shop in their own community, possibly reducing vehicle traffic to outside shopping areas.

The county's approval Monday does not mean that Placer Vineyards will soon start construction. The landowners must still go through the review of their proposed habitat mitigation with federal environmental agencies.

The Placer Vineyards property is dotted with vernal pools, the seasonal wetlands that host a variety of endangered species, and other types of wetlands.

Landowners plan to preserve about 3,600 acres of open space off-site and 700 acres on-site, according to documents filed with the county. The developers anticipate filling about 100 acres of wetlands both on-site and off-site where roads and pipelines will be built. They will compensate by preserving twice as many vernal pools elsewhere, said lawyer Jim Moose.

The Sierra Club maintains that the mitigation plan is inadequate, and is considering a lawsuit.

Terry Davis, coordinator of the Sierra Club's Motherlode Chapter, said Placer Vineyards should include more detailed plans for preservation of vernal pools and connected grasslands.

"Our ballpark figure would be somewhere in the neighborhood of 4,000 to 5,000 acres," he said.

Federal agencies also have raised concerns.

In a May 1 letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which must issue permits before any wetlands can be filled, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommended "denial of the project as currently proposed."

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