

EDITORIAL AND OPINION

Voter control of urban growth boundaries looms in November

Historically, property owners have relied heavily on individual real property rights as a foundation for economic development. As our population has grown, however, and undeveloped land has become less plentiful, communities have en-

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OPINION

by Cameron "Scott" Kirk

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A new paradigm for voters...

So far, most curbs on individual property rights have been enacted by elected officials. In the upcoming November election, however, Sonoma County voters will consider ballot measures to determine whether growth boundaries around and between cities should be set in place for the next 20 years.

A county referendum, if approved, would establish areas of restricted development, often referred to as separator zones, between cities. The county measure seeks to reinforce separate city referendums in Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, and Healdsburg that would establish 20-year growth boundaries for the respective cities. Rohnert Park has a measure on the ballot that would establish its growth boundary for a four-year period. Perhaps most importantly, the referendums prohibit any change of boundaries except by majority vote of the citizens.

If passed, these initiatives will take growth boundary control out of the hands

of elected officials and place it in the hands of voters. City council members and county supervisors will no longer conduct hearings on growth boundary issues. Developers will no longer try to educate and persuade local representatives of the values of expanding boundaries. Instead, property owners seeking to develop property outside established growth areas will have to convince the voting constituency of the advantages of expansion. Accordingly, it will become increasingly important for the community to engage in informed discussions regarding land use issues.

While the debate between "developers" and "environmentalists" continues on a variety of levels and issues, the voting public must begin to consider specific questions regarding land use, such as how best to maintain vital city centers; how best to manage what local economic growth may be deemed acceptable; and how development, whether we like it or not, may be limited by water and other natural resources, as well as local and countywide infrastructures such as sewers and roads.

Voters must also begin to recognize how development will affect the tax base and how the results of development, such as additional wastewater, may affect infrastructure construction and maintenance costs, as well as environmental quality.

...and developers

Marin and Sonoma counties are both among the top five counties in the nation for preserving agricultural land, and both have demonstrated strong support for greenbelt areas that prohibit development in favor of open land. As the voters' influence becomes more directly controlling on land use issues—which is certain to become reality whether the November ballot measures pass or not—developers must learn to address these issues head on, paying more heed to voters' concerns.

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