

# The PANA Perspective

## **Rezoning? Study the impacts first**

By Tim Schmidt

The debate about housing, and particularly affordable housing, continues to take place throughout Santa Barbara County. At various times it is lively, contentious, and emotional. All too often it is misleading and short-sighted.

Last summer residents of the unincorporated area of Goleta were stunned to read on Santa Barbara County's official Web site that the Planning and Development Department had identified several potential locations for re-zoning to accommodate up to 3,000 homes on the South Coast area. This was in order to satisfy a state mandate known as the housing element. The Web site information turned out to be in error with regard to the total number of homes the county was seeking to plan for, yet the situation acted as a powerful catalyst for concern for many in our community.

The plans presented by the county were based on several assumptions that, rather than garner public endorsement, generated widespread skepticism and disagreement. Three major areas of concern about the county's proposal were:

- Highly valued open space and productive agricultural lands would be targeted for massive development, contrary to widely shared hopes to see them preserved.
- Housing densities proposed for subsequent development would be designed at levels more suited for dense urban areas and would therefore be incompatible with the surrounding neighborhoods.
- In the effort to satisfy the state's housing target, county planners appeared willing to ignore legitimate concerns regarding adding further burdens to our already-strained infrastructure.

Simply put, state-mandated growth targets ran headlong into neighborhood support for wise and realistic planning.

In a meeting that took place in November 2003, representatives of a handful of Goleta-area neighborhood associations met with County Supervisor Susan Rose, her staff, and members from the county's planning and development department to get an update on the housing element process. There it was clarified that the correct housing allocation for the South Coast for the period 2001-2008 is 1,182 homes. Adjusting for housing units that are forecast, have already been approved or whose approval is pending, the county roughly estimates that it is necessary to rezone for 46 low-income units and 111 very-low-income units to satisfy the state mandate — a total of 157 units.

Despite the county's vastly reduced estimate of the actual number of homes that must be rezoned for to comply with the state mandate, the county continues to argue that development of the San Marcos Growers' property on Hollister Avenue is necessary and therefore must be included in the update of the housing element.

Further, the county intends to make a considerable financial commitment to this effort by conducting a land-use planning workshop for the aforementioned site and some surrounding undeveloped properties.

A well-thought-out plan for this area incorporating broad community input would be invaluable to ensure that any future use of this prime agricultural land for housing development will provide the maximum lasting benefit to the community. However, the planning process for this land should not be fast-tracked in order to be included with the housing element.

County planners should make it a priority to conduct an in-depth and comprehensive study of evolving spheres of influence, potential annexation, probable growth in the city of Goleta and UC Santa Barbara, and the cumulative effects of these different factors on traffic and circulation patterns in the area. This is a reasonable approach. Taking the time to do a thorough study will serve the community well in the long run.

An argument against this approach is that by not immediately rezoning the land we may jeopardize our ability to get the housing element certified by the state and suffer loss of funding or other punitive measures. This response appears flawed for a variety of reasons, but most importantly because state housing element law acknowledges that total housing needs identified by the state may exceed available resources and the

**community's ability to satisfy this need. There can be very little disagreement that we can satisfy — or come extraordinarily close to satisfying — our housing allotment without needing to rezone any agricultural or open space right now.**

*Tim Schmidt is the president of The Patterson Area Neighborhoods Assn. PANA's Web site is located at [www.panaspeedbump.org](http://www.panaspeedbump.org).*

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