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DICK SCHMIDT / Sacramento Bee Staff Photo

Bill Center, an environmental activist, former county supervisor and architect of Measure Y.

More Information

- El Dorado County's competing measures

Measure M: Bans new approval of subdivisions with five houses or more if Caltrans determines that any El Dorado County stretch of Highway 50 west of Placerville will face stop-and-go traffic at peak hours. Bans rezoning of rural residential properties for higher-density construction, with exemptions for non-residential "economic development" projects.

Measure N: Extends for 25 years provisions requiring developers to pay for traffic impacts and prohibiting subdivisions that cause or worsen stop-and-go traffic. Allows developer traffic fees to serve as matching funds for Highway 50 improvements. Requires county to prioritize Highway 50 widening projects.

Measure O: Eliminates county designations that allow for future development in Shingle Springs, Camino and Pollock Pines. Defines those areas as rural centers where development is restricted. Restricts subdivision developments on select parcels in El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park currently zoned for lower-density housing.

El Dorado County residents wage ballot battle over growth

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El Dorado County's growth wars are headed to the November ballot with unexpected drama, quixotic political alliances and developer dollars flowing in conflicting directions.

Local environmentalists and advocates have qualified separate November initiatives – Measure M and Measure O – that seek to protect rural lifestyles, prevent gridlock on Highway 50 and stop traffic-inducing subdivisions in the Sierra foothills region.

Those initiatives, plus a third measure originally backed by a Sacramento group representing commercial builders, are drawing financial opposition from housing developers as well as real estate and engineering firms that are banking on continued residential growth in the county of 180,000 residents.

At stake are competing visions of the future for the county, where a 2004 general growth plan anticipates 21,000 new houses.

Slow-growth advocates say that number instead could reach 33,000 over the next two decades. They point to efforts by developers to win approval for additional projects, as builders promise “agri-suburbia” neighborhoods with nature trails, wine grapes and new communities blended into oak woodlands and golden slopes.

The latest ballot battles come 16 years after a voter revolt over the county's approval of projects bringing 11,000 new houses to El Dorado Hills. Measure Y in 1998 prohibited any residential project of five or more units that caused or worsened traffic gridlock. It was reaffirmed by voters in 2008.

Now Measure M seeks to ban new residential subdivisions if the California Department of Transportation determines that any stretch of Highway 50 west of Placerville is at or forecast to reach gridlocked traffic levels. The measure would prevent the county from rezoning rural residential properties for higher-density housing construction.

“This county can't be trusted to count cars ... on Highway 50,” said Bill Center, an environmental activist, former county supervisor and architect of Measure Y. “There are 17,000 residential parcels that can have a home built on them right now. There are another 16,000 applications for parcels between general plan amendments and major development applications. That's absurd. We don't need any of those.”

A second initiative, Measure O, emerged from a grass-roots movement of residents opposed to a 1,000-home subdivision, San Stino, near Shingle Springs communities of mostly 5-acre parcels.

The San Stino developer argued that the county general plan designates the area for potential development of residential communities. That prompted residents to rally against the project, arguing it was more compatible with the populous Sacramento Valley than rural El Dorado County. The project has not yet come up for a Board of Supervisors vote.

Measure O seeks to amend the general plan to restrict higher-density residential construction in Shingle Springs, Camino and Pollock Pines, as well as parts of El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park. That would make it more difficult for the county to approve San Stino and similar projects.

“There are investors, speculators who need Elk Grove-type growth or Rancho Cordova-type growth to make money up here,” said Lori Parlin, a Shingle Springs resident and former supervisorial candidate who backed the initiative drive. “There is a clash, and it's really come to head.”

El Dorado's ballot wars were stoked when Sacramento-based Region Builders PAC bankrolled a rival initiative to Measure M. The “Fix Our Local Roads” initiative, Measure N, promised to extend provisions of the anti-subdivision Measure Y for another 25 years.

Local slow-growth advocates said the measure by the commercial builders' group was a ruse to divert county traffic funds to improve Highway 50 for development, including unwanted big-box stores. Joshua Wood, executive director of Region Builders, in turn characterized Measure M as "a deceptive and malicious attempt to kill jobs in El Dorado County."

As of June 30, Region Builders had spent over \$80,000 on its initiative drive, with more than \$15,000 in contributions coming from the commercial development group. The Measure N campaign also took in \$10,000 from the Mercedes Benz of El Dorado Hills auto dealership. Another \$30,000 came from Californians Against Wasteful Spending, a political committee whose financial backers include a major Irvine-based apartment developer, Western National Group. Measure N drew opposition from an unlikely coalition of local environmentalists and the El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce.

This month, Region Builders abruptly walked away from its own initiative. The group declined to submit a ballot argument for Measure N and announced it wouldn't campaign for the initiative. On Wednesday, Wood upped the drama: He announced his group was endorsing the rival Measure M he previously derided.

Wood said he became convinced in conversations with county officials and Measure M advocates that the initiative would facilitate commercial projects under an "economic development" exemption to strict rules against traffic-producing projects.

"We've come to believe that the language they have in place ... has been sufficient to resolve our concerns," Wood said. Region Builders still opposes Measure O, he said.

The Chamber of Commerce and other development interests inside and outside the county are seeking to defeat all three initiatives. A committee called El Dorado County Voters for Local Control spent \$72,514 by June 30 on a campaign arguing that such growth planning by ballot will have disastrous impacts on traffic and the county's rural quality of life.

Contributors to the committee include Parker Development Co. The builder of the upscale Serrano El Dorado Hills community wants a zoning change to permit construction of 3,235 homes and townhouses in nearby oak-studded hills of Marble Valley, just south of Highway 50. Parker is also seeking approvals for projects to bring another 1,028 homes in El Dorado Hills.

"We are actively opposing all the measures on the ballot," said Kirk Bone, director of governmental affairs for Parker Development, which paid \$20,750 for polling for the campaign committee. "We think land-use planning by the ballot is not appropriate and takes away local control and property rights."

Other contributors to Voters for Local Control include a property-management firm tied to the proposed San Stino subdivision, a Rancho Cordova building products firm, engineering companies in Folsom and El Dorado Hills, a Sacramento homebuilder, real estate firms and the North State Building Industry Association.

The committee has hired a prominent Republican political consulting firm, Sacramento-based McNally Temple Associates, to lead the fight against the initiatives.

Campaign consultant Richard Temple characterized the measures as misguided efforts by residents dissatisfied with a "consensus" county growth plan that he said balances development plans with protections for the local environment. The Board of Supervisors-approved plan – dubbed "A Plan for Managed Growth and Open Roads" – was narrowly upheld in a 2005 voter referendum.

"This is just an extension of the battle over the general plan that has been going on for 10 or 15 years," Temple said. "But nobody wants to pave over El Dorado County. And no one wants no growth at all."

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