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Voters to settle growth question

El Dorado supervisors OK a ballot measure calling for adoption of a general plan.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published October 26, 2003*)

El Dorado County voters will determine how their county should grow when they go to the polls next year.

The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to place on the March ballot an initiative calling for adoption of a county general plan. But they also directed the county counsel to prepare a study of the effects the measure would have if it were approved by voters.

"I'm very, very pleased," Richard Russell, the man who undertook the initiative effort in August, said in an interview Wednesday. "I wasn't sure whether they would place it on the ballot yesterday or wait for the study."

The initiative was qualified this month through a signature campaign by El Dorado Citizens for Responsible Planning as an alternative to general plan options being considered by the Board of Supervisors.

Having cleared the first hurdle, Russell said, initiative proponents will turn their attention to preparing ballot arguments.

"As a group," he said, "we will be waging a campaign to get the message out on why this is a smart thing to do."

Typically, when presented with an initiative, the Board of Supervisors has the option of placing the measure on the ballot, adopting the measure by ordinance without putting it to a public vote or requesting an analysis of the measure's impacts, a study that would have to be completed within 30 days.

In this case, however, the county is breaking new ground, and County Counsel Louis Green said there was a significant question whether adopting the measure by ordinance was an option.

"There is no case law on this point," he said in his advice to the board against such action.

El Dorado County has operated under a court writ of mandate since 1999, when a Sacramento Superior Court judge ruled that its 1996 general plan failed to specify the effect that planned residential growth would have on traffic, water supplies and quality of life in the foothills.

The county has circulated four draft alternative general plans and is preparing responses to public comments on those documents. The board is scheduled to adopt a general plan in June, but the initiative, if approved, would put a plan in place three months earlier.

The plan proposed in the initiative is similar to the county's draft plan known as the 1996 alternative. The '96 alternative allows more growth than two other alternatives -- one that limits growth based on environmental considerations and the other based on road capacity. Under the fourth, or "no plan,"

alternative, the county would continue to operate under the court writ.

The plan proposed in the initiative, however, eliminates a provision in the '96 alternative that requires some percentage of homes in new developments be affordable to low-and moderate-income households.

El Dorado County Taxpayers for Quality Growth will submit a ballot argument against the initiative, spokesman Keith Johnson said. The taxpayers group challenged the adequacy of the environmental study for the 1996 plan, leading to the court's writ of mandate.

Johnson said he understands the frustration of those backing the initiative. "Rick Russell has been a good friend of a lot of environmentalists for years," he said.

Johnson said his group would not object to adoption of the 1996 general plan alternative if it included mitigation measures that satisfied the court.

As for the initiative's chances of passing, Johnson said, "There's going to be a strong voting block against it in the west end of the county."

But, he added, developers in the county are a powerful force.

About the Writer

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