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Concerns about El Dorado plan are aired

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - *(Published February 1, 2004)*

Supporters and opponents of El Dorado County's Measure G agree on two points: The county has spent too much time and money trying to develop its long-term blueprint for growth, and voter approval of the initiative would move the county into uncharted territory.

During a forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters on Thursday night, proponents Richard Russell and Art Marinaccio and opponents Bill Center and Barry Wasserman debated the pros and cons of the initiative, which asks voters to adopt a general plan.

El Dorado County has spent 15 years and \$15 million trying to put a plan in place, said Russell, the measure's author and owner of a scientific consulting business. Despite the sincere efforts of seven boards of supervisors, he said, "El Dorado County has proven that it can't implement what 57 other counties have been able to do."

A voter-approved general plan would stand the best chance of surviving a lawsuit and would put the county on the road to regaining control of land-use policy, he said.

Wasserman, a former Placerville City Councilman and opponent of the measure, said it was difficult to discuss an initiative that asks voters to adopt a document of more than 200 pages. Because of the document's length, he noted, the county Elections Department will not publish the full text in the sample ballot. Instead, voters will be given a phone number to call if they wish to request a copy.

"It's the wrong way to adopt a bad plan," Wasserman said.

The county counsel's analysis of the measure responds to a number of questions about the effect the initiative would have if passed. The answers are uncertain, Wasserman said, "because it's untested in the law."

Measure G asks voters to approve a general plan based on a version of 1996 general plan, one of four alternatives the county has drafted. El Dorado County has not had a general plan, which sets land-use policies, since a Sacramento Superior Court judge ruled in 1999 that the 1996 plan's environmental analysis failed to explain how residential growth would affect traffic, water supplies and quality of life in the foothills.

The county has prepared environmental reports and received public comment on the four alternatives - the 1996 plan, a roadway-constrained plan, an environmentally constrained plan and a "no plan" alternative. The Board of Supervisors is scheduled to adopt a plan this summer.

The document proposed by Measure G would allow more growth than two of the county's other options. A fourth alternative calls for no general plan, leaving the county to operate under the 1999 court order.

Asked why the 1996 alternative was chosen, Russell said the plan has had the benefit of numerous public hearings.

Center, a former county supervisor, noted that he was on the board when the 1996 plan went through the hearing process. Many people who lived in the county then have left while other people have moved to the

area in the past decade and may have different views of the plan, he said.

Wasserman and Center said the initiative would create problems because it limits the Board of Supervisors' ability to amend the plan. Voters would have to approve plan changes other than those pertaining to land use and housing.

Center and Marinaccio agreed the plan contains policies that should be changed. Under Measure G, Center said, an election would be required to change the policy.

If a change in the plan were deemed urgent, he said, the board would have to call a special election or wait six months to a year to place it on the ballot.

Forum moderator Paula Lee asked the panelists to respond to questions submitted in writing by members of the audience. Several, she said, related to traffic.

Asked whether the 1996 general plan was based on Highway 50 being widened to eight lanes, Marinaccio, a real estate and land-use consultant, said he believes the highway eventually will go to eight lanes. A general plan, he said, is intended to provide a vision of the future.

If development occurs as projected in the 1996 plan, Wasserman said, traffic will be heavy enough to warrant an eight-lane Highway 50. But he predicted the county won't have enough money to fund the expansion.

The panelists also were asked how the county would meet requirements for affordable housing under the Measure G plan.

Russell said every county must provide in its general plan a vision of how it will meet housing needs. A provision of the 1996 plan alternative requiring subdivision developers to include homes affordable to low- and moderate-income households was eliminated from the Measure G plan because the state Department of Housing and Community Development has determined the provision doesn't work, he said. The requirement only drives up the price of other homes in the development, Russell said.

A more effective approach, he said, is to designate in the general plan sites that would be appropriate for affordable housing.

Because the county has done a poor job of providing such housing, Wasserman said, the policy was added to the general plan requiring developers to include a percentage of affordable homes in a subdivision or contribute funds to provide them elsewhere.

Wasserman said he believed the provision was omitted from the Measure G plan because developers don't like it.

Panelists also were asked who was funding the campaigns for and against Measure G.

Russell said he had not seen the campaign disclosure statements. Wasserman said he had.

People have a right to contribute to campaigns and support candidates and issues, he said, but voters also should know who is funding the efforts.

The Dec. 31 campaign finance reports, he said, showed \$29,000 contributed by the Measure Z Committee, a group backing a 1998 ballot measure that opposed Measure Y, an initiative to control traffic. Of that amount, he said, \$15,000 was contributed by real estate broker N. Bruce Ashwill.

The Measure G campaign also received \$11,000 from the Builders Exchange of El Dorado County and \$10,000 from the El Dorado County Republican Central Committee, he said. Disclosure statements for those organizations show that about the time they contributed to Measure G, each received similar amounts from Ashwill, Wasserman said.

As a member of the Republican Central Committee, Marinaccio said he authorized the contribution to the Measure G campaign, but no funding from the committee was "given a certain path." Marinaccio said he was not aware that Ashwill had given that much.

Ashwill was out of town and could not be reached for comment. John Conforti, outgoing president of the Builders Exchange, said Friday that he thought the organization has given about \$10,000 to the Measure G campaign, and he was not aware of a contribution from Ashwill. "Please don't confuse us with the big developers," he said. "We're just the little guys."

Wasserman said the largest donation to the "No on Measure G" committee was \$3,000 from Kathi Lishman's campaign fund. Lishman, mayor of Placerville, ran for county supervisor in a special election last summer.

About the Writer

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