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El Dorado County holds off on parks and trails master plan

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El Dorado County officials pulled off the road en route to a parks and trails master plan, drawing protests from advisory panel members who feared a hijacking.

Laura Gill, county chief administrative officer, said she postponed soliciting consultants to complete the master plan after learning that the county likely lacked sufficient funds and could cut costs by using plans prepared by other agencies.

But members of the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Trails Advisory Committee complained that they had not been informed of Gill's proposal and feared that years of work toward a master plan were being ignored.

"There's tremendous frustration that after we've spent 3 1/2 years, we get a new proposal," Bob Smart, a member of the Parks and Recreation Commission, told the Board of Supervisors last week.

The master plan is intended to assess existing parks, open space, trails and recreation programs in relation to the county's needs, and to guide planning and development of facilities and programs to keep pace with growth.

Gill said \$150,000 is included in the current capital improvement program budget for the master plan, but consultants have indicated an additional \$100,000 might be needed to complete the document. Given the county's fiscal constraints, Gill said she couldn't recommend appropriating more money for the plan.

Gill said she learned that several other agencies including the El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park community services districts, as well as the El Dorado Irrigation District, have completed master plans for the parks and recreational facilities they operate. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has prepared a regional recreation plan and assessment, and the city of Placerville has hired a consultant to complete its parks master plan.

Gill said she had talked with Placerville City Manager John Driscoll about the county participating in the city's effort, noting that about 75 percent of the people who use Placerville's recreation facilities live in the unincorporated area.

Also, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy has expressed interest in contributing toward a plan that would address water quality issues, Gill said. Funding proposals also have been received from the California Tahoe Conservancy.

Given these offers, and the information on facilities and services provided by other agencies, Gill recommended preparing two master plans – one for the Tahoe basin and the other for the western slope.

When they are completed, staff members would evaluate and prioritize the identified needs to develop a single capital improvement program.

The master plan is required under the general plan, the county's blueprint for growth.

Gill said she envisions the county's master plan as a "gaps analysis" to determine what services neither the county nor other agencies provide.

Supervisor Helen Baumann said that she was concerned that funding is constantly being shifted away from park projects in her district. "We lost Bass Lake (Regional Park)," she said.

Baumann complained that the Board of Supervisors had not received adequate information from the Parks and Recreation Commission.

Smart said the Bass Lake project was stalled when 10 acres were sought for a school site. Because work on the park could not proceed at that time, funds were shifted to trails, he said.

He asked the board to refer Gill's proposal to the Parks and Recreation Commission for review.

Melba Leal said she has been involved with the Trails Advisory Committee and the advocacy group Trails Now. There is a great deal of frustration among trails advocates, who have been working for 30 years to develop a trail system in the county, she said.

"I would just like everybody to pull together and make things happen, especially with trails and recreation," Leal said.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said he believed the various parties had similar goals.

"I see this three-ring circus as being all in the same ring," he said.

Sweeney said a master plan is needed, but he favored waiting to solicit consultants' proposals to clarify the scope of the document. He said Gill was just suggesting a different approach.

"We are totally in concurrence with working with Laura (Gill)," Smart said.

But he said the commission wanted to be kept informed.

The supervisors directed Gill to look at preparing separate master plans for the west slope and South Lake Tahoe area, as well as participating with the city of Placerville and pursuing a grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

They also called for Gill to further review the master plan process with the Parks and Recreation Commission and to report back to the board April 22.

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