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## **County can't spare water, ag land RANCHO SAN JUAN DEVELOPMENT**

By **JULIE ENGELL**

Guest Commentary

This November, Monterey County will make a final decision on the largest development proposal in county history. Rancho San Juan is a new city, the size of Marina, that the county plans to wedge between Salinas and Prunedale on the last remaining ag land east of Highway 101 between those two disparate communities.

The Rancho San Juan Opposition Coalition opposes this proposed 2,500-acre development which would:

- urbanize 1750 acres of crop land.
- more than double the traffic on Highway 101-- with no funded capacity improvements.
- contain 4,000 homes averaging \$495,000 -- unaffordable to 90 percent of county workers.
- pump an additional 600 acre-feet of water from an over-drafted aquifer.
- require 5.6 million cubic yards of grading.
- reserve 3 million square feet for industrial development.
- convert rare coastal prairie to golf course.

Furthermore, economic analysis completed for the General Plan Update showed that the infrastructure and service needs of such a new community, situated far from existing city services, would result in a continuing net estimated loss to the county budget of \$1.5 million per year. The same analysis reveals that loss of the area's crop land will result in an annual \$33 million loss to the county's economy. No specific information is available about the industrial uses that will replace that economic activity, but we are expected to "believe" that it will exceed that \$33 million sufficiently to also offset the infrastructure required to support it.

The Monterey County Planning Commission recommended that Rancho San Juan not be designated for urban development in the county's General Plan Update. However, the Board of Supervisors ignored both the commission's recommendation and the economic analysis when it recently decided to abandon the general plan process and start over again.

Despite Caltrans' characterization of the Draft Environmental Impact Report's (DEIR) data as "unreliable" and its analysis as "inadequate"; despite the fact the DEIR listed 39 separate, significant environmental impacts, many of them unmitigatable and irreversible, the DEIR painted an overly optimistic picture.

The county targeted the area's farmland for development in the 1980s as an Area of Development Concentration for which a master development plan (Specific Plan) was to be created. Development in the Greater Salinas Area was based upon several assumptions, among them construction of a Highway 101 bypass around Prunedale and resolution of water overdraft and salt water intrusion problems in the area. No real progress has been made on either.

Controversy over worsening traffic and water problems stymied efforts on the 1998 Rancho San Juan Specific Plan. However, that did not stop Marin County developer, HYH Corporation, from submitting a development application for 671 acres. Instead of denying the application outright, supervisors side-stepped a decision until the county General Plan was updated. HYH Corporation sued and won because no other developer was similarly treated.

The court mandated that Monterey County process both a Specific Plan and a development proposal from HYH Corporation. However, the court explicitly stated that the court's decision in no way interfered with the Board of Supervisors' discretion to approve, modify or deny either the Specific Plan or the HYH development proposal.

The board directed county planning staff to work closely with the developer in creating the Specific Plan, blurring the county staff's oversight role. Responding to a question during testimony before the Monterey County Planning Commission, Alana Knaster, assistant planning director, stated that Monterey County is the project proponent.

Help us remind the Board of Supervisors to represent the interests of Monterey County, not the interests of HYH Corporation. Tell them we want the "no project" alternative for the area.

Julie Engell is chairwoman of the Rancho San Juan Opposition Coalition. She lives in Prunedale.