

Introduction

The Community General Plan

In June 2004, after five years of effort by the public, County Staff, and the County Planning Commission, and after the expenditure of approximately \$5 million dollars, three members of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors voted to abandon the proposed Monterey County General Plan Update.

The Board's "start over" action rejected a recommendation from its own Planning Commission and years of community participation in the General Plan Update (GPU) process. Between 1999 and June 2004, hundreds of General Plan public meetings and hearings had been held throughout Monterey County. These community meetings had shaped the basic goals and principles of the proposed General Plan.

After voting to "start over," and to produce a "new" General Plan Update, the Board established a new process to replace its earlier GPU effort. Rather than basing its new plan on citizen participation, this "start over" process relied upon on a series of closed door meetings between County staff and various unidentified "stakeholders." General public participation, the Board determined, was neither desired nor encouraged.

One aspect of the Board's decision was of particular import. Earlier drafts of the General Plan Update were based upon "Twelve Guiding Objectives" adopted by the Board of Supervisors in July 2001. These objectives had been developed during extensive public outreach undertaken by the County at the start of its General Plan Update process. The "start over" GPU effort made no firm commitment to those key planning principles.

Faced with this unprecedented action by the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, a number of citizens who had been actively working on the Monterey County General Plan Update since 1999 decided that it was simply "unacceptable" for the Board of Supervisors to attempt to end the community's role in developing the GPU. These citizens decided that they would continue the community based process, and produce a General Plan Update that reflected the needs and aspirations of the citizens and residents of Monterey County. This "Community General Plan" is the result of their efforts.

Eighteen community groups sponsored the "Community General Plan" process. These groups are: the California Native Plant Society, Monterey Bay Chapter, the Carmel Valley Association, Citizens for Responsible Growth, the Coalition to Protect Housing, Farmlands, Air & Water, Concerned Citizens of River Road, Friends, Artists and Neighbors of Elkhorn Slough (FANS), The Highway 68

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Coalition, LandWatch Monterey County, The League of Women Voters of the Monterey Peninsula, Líderes Comunitarios de Salinas, the Monterey Pine Forest Watch, the North County Citizens Oversight Coalition, the Planning and Conservation League Foundation, the Prunedale Neighbors Group, the Prunedale Preservation Alliance, the Rancho San Juan Opposition Coalition, Save Our Shores, and the Sierra Club, Ventana Chapter. All the citizens and residents of Monterey County were invited to participate in this process. Many groups and individuals accepted this open invitation and participated, including senior members of the County staff.

A professional planner, Terrell Watt, was hired by the sponsoring groups. Her assignment was to use the experience of the best General Plans throughout California, and to draft an integrated, legally adequate General Plan for the County. This Plan was to be based on the 1982 existing General Plan, the Twelve Guiding Objectives, the “Third Draft” General Plan Update that the Board of Supervisors had refused to consider, and additional community input received in a series of seven Community Forums held throughout Monterey County.

The resulting “Community General Plan” contains nine “Elements,” seven Elements required by state law and two additional Elements. The required Elements are the Land Use, Housing, Infrastructure (Circulation), Conservation, Open Space, Safety, and Noise Elements. The “Community General Plan” also includes an Agriculture Element and an Administration and Enforcement Element.

Community Forums, open to the public, and widely advertised, were held as follows:

- Prunedale, August 21st – General Overview
- Carmel Valley, September 14th – Land Use and Housing
- Salinas, October 14th – Conservation, Open Space, and Safety
- Greenfield, October 28th – Infrastructure and Noise
- Marina, November 13th – Administration/Enforcement
- Salinas, November 22nd – General Overview (Conducted in Spanish)
- Chualar, November 30th – Housing and Community Areas (Spanish)

Each Forum included a presentation by Ms. Watt, followed by a question and answer session. Then, the attendees worked, usually in small groups, recommending language and policies, and presenting concerns that needed to be addressed in the General Plan. Group and individual comments were collected and a response was made to every comment. Following the completion of the Community Forums, a “redraft” of the original proposal was prepared. This “Community General Plan” is the final product.

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Many important policy provisions incorporated into the “Community General Plan” come directly from suggestions made in the Community Forums. For instance, an “Agriculture” Element was added to the Plan. The “Administration” Element became an “Administration and Enforcement” Element, with stronger policies to enforce the County’s planning regulations. Affordable housing policies were strengthened, and Chualar became a “Community Area,” reflecting the strong sense of the Chualar community that the redevelopment and revitalization of Chualar is a necessity, if social equity concerns are to be served. A number of important housing policies were also added, based on recommendations made during the Community Forums.

The process that produced this “Community General Plan” was nothing short of inspiring. If adopted by the Board of Supervisors, the Community General Plan will strengthen the local economy, protect and preserve the County’s incomparable natural resources, and advance social equity. The Community General Plan reflects the policy priorities of the people of Monterey County, and is based on the principle that the communities and residents of the County know best how to protect and preserve it, and to plan for its future.