

“The SDAs, Grass Valley’s Future and How To Get Involved”

By Mayor Gerard Tassone

Growth...Traffic...Change... These are three topics frequently brought forward by County and City residents to our Council as issues that need attention. These well could be the most important issues facing the City today. As the Council will soon be deliberating over some major development proposals facing the City, it is important to review the growth challenges that the City has faced in the past and what steps we are taking to ensure a positive, bright future for our City. It is my hope that this column will provide you with an understanding that the Grass Valley City Council is striving to make informed decisions about these important topics and that your opinion matters to us.

First of all, I believe we have a great City that is unique and second to none. As your Mayor and a life-long resident of Grass Valley, I wish to protect the essence of our City for future generations to come. This includes our historic downtown, quaint neighborhoods and wonderful quality of life that we all care about so much.

Our vision for the community is clearly outlined in the City of Grass Valley’s 2020 General Plan, which was adopted in 1999. In preparing for this future, the City needs room to grow. In the 1980’s, the City planned for and guided various developments, such as Whispering Pines Business Park and the Morgan Ranch residential neighborhood. The City’s General Plan includes the addition of four Special Development Areas (SDA’s) to meet much of the housing, employment and recreation needs of Western Nevada County. It’s important to remember that the SDA areas have been under consideration for decades. In the past, these properties were owned by individuals who were not interested in any major development but did wish annexation

to the City. Now each of the four SDA's has new owners who have plans and wish to develop their property in the City of Grass Valley.

Here is a brief history of where we are with the SDA's and where we are headed. The City's General Plan identified four SDA's in its unincorporated planning area that are anticipated for future annexation to the City by the year 2020. These four areas are Loma Rica Ranch, Northstar, Bear River Mill Site (SouthHill Village) and Kenny Ranch. Each SDA represents a large block of adjoining parcels with a common ownership.

The four SDA's have been identified in prior County and City General Plans dating back to 1982. One of the County's General Plan's central themes is to direct urban growth into community regions that can effectively and economically provide urban types of services, i.e. the City of Grass Valley. The City's General Plan recognized that the SDA's areas, if taken separately or collectively, would have the potential to significantly influence the land use character and public service levels of the community. As a result, the City has required that each SDA be "Master Planned" to determine a suitable land use plan. The City's General Plan encourages the SDA's to plan for a diversity of land uses and housing types with a development style that is compatible with Grass Valley. It also stipulates that these four SDA's will be annexed and incrementally developed by 2020 and not developed all at once.

For a SDA to be annexed to the City and be approved for any type of development, it is subject to a number of steps. An applicant must file a Specific Plan or Master Plan with the City, an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) must be prepared and reviewed and these documents would be considered during a series of public hearing and workshops held by the Planning Commission, City Council and the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo). Three of the SDA's have filed applications

with specific plans to the City and an EIR is in progress for the SouthHill Village. Each SDA must comply with the City's application policies and show how their project is in compliance with the General Plan including a specific phasing plan.

The City Council is aware that all of the SDA's are considering some level of change to the City's General Plan. Any major change proposed by an SDA needs to be carefully reviewed against the assumptions and expectations of the General Plan. The adjacent table shows the latest land use scenarios currently under consideration for each SDA and how each compares to the City's General Plan.

In 2003, the City Council reviewed the SDA's and recognized that the combined acreage and land use mix differed from what was represented in the City's General Plan.

In order to evaluate the land use changes being proposed by the SDA's, Council directed a study be prepared to assess the market demand for housing, commercial and business park space in Western Nevada County. This SDA study, entitled the "Economic and Fiscal Conditions Study for the City of Grass Valley", is nearing completion and projected for release in September 2005. An additional evaluation of the vacant commercial and industrial lands within the City limits is being conducted to determine how much "buildable" land is available. This study is an informational tool intended to provide Council with a picture as to what the future market, fiscal and job-housing demands will be in Western Nevada County. The question facing the City Council and our area is how we plan for, and be responsive, to these demands?

Until the SDA Study is completed and accepted, the Council has directed that all of the SDA applications are on hold. Once this study is complete, the Council will meet and discuss a strategy for how this information will be used in evaluating the SDA

proposals and whether any changes should be considered to the City's General Plan. The first meeting will most likely be in the fall 2005 and of course will be open to public. It is important to note that the economic and market conditions for a community are subject to change and that can influence how growth occurs within a community.

The SDA's have a lot of history and some of the SDA applicants have had community meetings to gain input for their proposals. One thing is clear, there will be some development on each of SDA's whether it happens in the City or County. Information is currently being gathered that compares the amount of development that could occur in the County should the City decide not to annex these properties. This will be another important piece of information to be presented this fall.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned "how you can get involved". Although the process has already started now is the most important time to speak up and state your opinion. The best way to do this is to attend the public meetings. To this point nothing has been decided for approval or denial of any of the SDA applications and it is certain there will be many meetings and opportunities for community input for the SDA's and future growth of the City. Again, attend the meetings and if you are not sure of anything or need additional information please feel free to contact your City representatives, that's what we are here for. You can call 274-4310. You can also stay up to date and be advised of future meetings by checking the City's website at www.cityofgrassvalley.com. Your opinion does matter but if we don't hear from you then we will never know what your thoughts are. If properly planned, the four SDA's are areas that can address our areas future needs for housing, employment and recreation.