

General Plan Getting Close Scrutiny

By Miles Shuper, staff writer

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Tulare County - Although the process of digesting the massive Tulare County General Plan Update document has only begun, those who have seen it say they expect to closely scrutinize the growth policy.

Following a 60-day public review period, the 430-page plan and accompanying documents including a 900-page Environmental Impact Report, will go to county supervisors for potential adoption.

An indication of just how much scrutiny the General Plan Update, which has been a work in progress for nearly nine years, is a letter from 20 environmental groups sent to supervisors after the documents' March 25 release.

In addition, the Council of Cities, representing the eight incorporated cities in the county, will be studying the document closely.

Phil Vandegrift, Tulare's vice mayor and one of the leaders of the Council of Cities which waged an often tense battle with county staff over several key issues including growth policies and city fringe areas, expressed initial optimism.

"We are having our planners review the two thousand-plus page documents and intend to have a first glance report response in two weeks after a briefing with the Council of Cities members. It is encouraging that the county has indicated a desire to work with the cities to mirror each city's general plan land use designation within the UDB (Urban Development Boundary) 20-year growth pattern. The review will tell us what we need to do to make sure we all understand the rules of engagement for the management and implementation of development without our UDBs," Vandegrift said.

The letter from the 20 environmental groups sounded the same refrain, one of general optimism and relief that the long-overdue General Plan Update has become reality after updates and revisions. The groups claim to have issued more than one-thousand pages of comments to the original draft plan.

The letter states "Over the coming weeks, we will be studying the new draft with great interest. Our review will focus on whether the plan now satisfactorily addresses the key concerns raised by those comments and by the general public. These concerns related to how the plan addresses and affects [air quality](#), water quality and availability, protecting agricultural and natural lands from development and diversification of the economy-all while sustaining and protecting our natural and cultural diversity, agricultural and rural way of life, people and communities."

Among those 20 groups is Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment, Sierra Club, Tulare County Medical Society, Visalia Friends Meeting and Tulare County Audubon Society.

County officials concede the probability that the General Plan Update will generate legal action once it is formally adopted by County Supervisors, but say that is normally the case with most long-term planning policies.

Key components in the documents, in addition to the growth policies around cities, include updated guidelines for development and growth in rural communities and hamlets. County officials say those guidelines are aimed at making those areas economically viable. Growth in small rural areas is a key in helping to support the cost of providing services as water, water quality, sewer and other needs.

The protection of prime agricultural land also is a major factor in the plan and EIR which incorporates Tulare County's Rural Valley Land Plan (RVLP). The RVLP, which dates to 1975, is highly regarded as a model for the protection of agricultural and rural lands and uses a point system which sets development standards.

The General Plan Update and companion documents are available for review online at <http://generalplan.co.tulare.ca.us> or by calling 624-7000.