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Wednesday, January 5, 2005 Last modified: [Wednesday, January 5, 2005 10:02 AM PST](#)

Rural living vs. urban growth

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Tracing the roots to the battle over the county's General Plan reveals less of a political fight and more of a cultural battle.

This clash of rural living and urban sophistication can be found in small battlegrounds such as design review committees to the county's biggest platforms in Placerville.

It has been described most often as east vs. west: long-time residents attempting to preserve the rurality of the county in the east and "city slickers" from the Bay Area moving into the west.



No where is the clash of rural living and urban sophistication more evident than in this view looking from El Dorado Hills into Folsom. Telegraph File Photo .

"There are uphill people and downhill people. It creates the tension. We're kind of a bi-polar county," said John Thomson, who assists a conservative-minded growth organization in Bass Lake.

Thomson's association, the Bass Lake Action Committee, is in protracted fight over a 41-acre community regional park. Lights, roads and dense urbanization are the committee's issues, but Thomson said he believes his group is misunderstood.

"People think we're saying, 'I'm here and no one else can come.' That's not true. We're not anti-growth. We're anti-growth if growth means bulldozing trees and putting 20 houses on an acre. We realize there's a need for dense housing. There's good development and bad development," he said.

Thomson is among a group of outspoken activists with cavalier political heroes, such as El Dorado County District 4 Supervisor Charlie Paine, whose district covers a northern portion of El Dorado Hills. Paine has been a chief opponent to the recently adopted General Plan, which he says does not address the need for roads and infrastructure as the county grows.

"When I think of Placer, it's a county that's almost two to two and half times larger. Highway 49 is a zoo. If we don't come up with solutions, we're going to look like that in 5 or 10 years," Paine said.

"People in Mosquito pay taxes for Highway 50, yet their roads for 20 miles before they get to Highway 50 are not even adequately maintained. About \$1.8 million is spent on road maintenance. That number hasn't been increased in about three years. People in the low land or the flat land don't understand it. El Dorado Hills is not the center of the universe. El Dorado Hills is not El Dorado County. But the majority of the board is wrapped up in El Dorado Hills."

The most recent U.S. Census Bureau statistics estimate the county's population at 170,000, scattered across the county's two incorporated cities and dozens of special districts, such as El Dorado Hills. Placerville has served as the political center and house to the capitol seat, but with less than 10,000 in population, its political clout may be waning.

Thanks to some redistricting at the turn of the century, El Dorado Hills and its 30,000 residents gained 3/5ths of the county's board of supervisor seats. District 1 Supervisor Rusty Dupray represents the heart of El Dorado Hills while District 2 Supervisor Helen Baumann represents parts of Serrano and the south side of Highway 50.

The Telegraph continues its series on "Defining El Dorado Hills" this week in a look at its political make up and its relationship to El Dorado County.

Advantage downhill?

Bill Center says there's a bigger issue at stake. Center, a member of the No Gridlock Committee which is attempting to amend the county charter to include language that would force the county to widen Highway 50 from Cameron Park to the Sacramento county line, says developers have the real power base.

"Most of the people who moved in the last 15 to 20 years have moved into the very large subdivisions, put in by some very, very powerful people who have had the ability to either co-opt or bypass the entrenched Placerville oriented power structure," he said.

Some in El Dorado Hills feel the change is inevitable.

Wayne Lowery, El Dorado Hills Community Services District general manager, said he returned in El Dorado Hills in 1990 after a two-year stay in Orange County. He was in for a bit of a shock.

"When I left I tried to sell my house (in 1988), I had a hard time getting interest in it. Comments were like, 'Geez, you're like 30 miles from Sacramento.' I came back in 1990 and my house was up for sale again. The price went up 80 percent. The comments were like, 'My gosh, you're only 30 minutes from Sacramento.' " Attitudes had changed," he said.

Lowery disagreed there's been any major cultural shift towards urban sophistication, adding El Dorado Hills has always attracted the affluent dating back to its history with Aerojet. He said the only thing that's truly changed is the population and the newness of it.

"If there's a difference in culture and attitude, it's people not appreciating change or missing the way it was. Then you have the whole traffic issue, and I think it's that issue more than anything," he said. "What's happened is they've choked off the freeways, so it's not an easy commute anymore. Not the congestion of traffic, but the congestion of people."

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