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El Dorado no longer a 'gray' area

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado County is finally on the map - the Sacramento Area Council of Government's Blueprint Project map, that is.

Because the county was without a general plan, it had not participated in the regional planning process begun three years ago.

Now, with a general plan in place and local authority over land use restored, SACOG is replacing the gray area that had represented El Dorado County on the regional map with appropriate land-use designations.

"I feel like El Dorado County has finally graduated," county Supervisor Jack Sweeney said. "We are no longer a gray blob. SACOG welcomes us with color."

SACOG Executive Director Mike McKeever attended the board's Dec. 13 meeting to explain the steps necessary to incorporate the county in the Blueprint Project, which will provide the basis for the agency's Metropolitan Transportation Plan update. SACOG disburses transportation funds for the Sacramento region. As part of the process, McKeever said, SACOG is preparing a map showing anticipated land uses in 2030. El Dorado County's general plan projects growth for 2025 and at build-out, Mc-Keever said, explaining SACOG needs to work with county staff members to determine how much growth is likely to occur from 2026 to 2030.

Estimates are needed for anticipated growth in population, housing and jobs, he said.

"Because you have been through this process quite recently, and because of the number of housing units already approved, you're not likely to have a lot of changes from the general plan," McKeever told the board.

Sweeney said it was important to proceed cautiously in adjusting growth estimates. "It is the argument underpinning the whole general plan and which plan we should have adopted," he said.

Growth likely will be less than projected, Sweeney said, arguing that various policies in the general plan will limit development. "There will be a lot fewer people that can move into the area than thought," he said.

Much of the controversy over the county's general plan, he said, has centered on the difference between projections for 2025 and a point when the county is fully developed.

"I'm concerned that someone produces, or induces a new number into the game that is not really based on policies," Sweeney said. "If all of a sudden a new number is out there, then we have a new argument to deal with."

Supervisor Rusty Dupray said growth projections may be more accurate for communities in the flatlands. For El Dorado County, he said, "the problem is basically our terrain. We have a lot more challenges as far as slope and topography."

McKeever said those concerns will be covered in discussions between SACOG and county staff members. Currently, he said, SACOG is translating land uses on the county general plan map into "Blueprint language" so the categories will be consistent regionwide. He likened it to translating

Italian to Greek. The information will help determine how the region and individual jurisdictions handle traffic, air pollution, housing and jobs.

"We need to know if you're going to have a new job center," McKeever said. "It makes a difference in traffic if it is located in one place or another."

Land uses in the Blueprint will reflect the county's wishes, McKeever said. SACOG employees will provide technical assistance, but it is important that county staff members be involved, he said.

McKeever said he hopes SACOG and the county can reach agreement by next month.

Art Marinaccio, a spokesman for the Taxpayers Association of El Dorado County, said he has never been enamored of the Blueprint process, though he has participated in it. He argued that it is incompatible with the wishes of county residents, who value a rural lifestyle.

"The basic premise of the Blueprint process is 'Urban is good, rural is bad,' " he said, arguing that the program promotes transit-oriented development.

"We need to move houses down the hill, move jobs up the hill or have a very big Highway 50," Marinaccio said.

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