

Bill Morem: Santa Margarita decision is a big mistake

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Call me a cockeyed optimist, but I didn't think the Board of Supervisors would actually give a tentative OK to the first phase of the Santa Margarita Ranch development.

Sure, it was a foregone conclusion that Supervisor Harry Ovitt would vote for approval; I can't remember if he's ever voted against a development.

And Supervisor Jerry Lenthall has pretty much followed Ovitt's lead while on the board, so his vote wasn't much of a surprise.

But Supervisor Katcho Achadjian? This was a defining moment in his service to the community and he failed.

Can it possibly be lost on him that this project, with its 11 Class 1 environmental impacts — impacts that can't be fixed, has earned near unanimous opposition from residents, planners and governmental agencies?

There's been a sea change in this county with regard to development, and Lenthall and Ovitt have been turned out of office on that tide. If Katcho doesn't think he'll also be swept from office if he decides to run again in 2010, he's underestimated the electorate of his district.

People sacrifice to live in this county. It's expensive and a jobs ghetto. But the reason we sacrifice, as shown by countywide survey after survey, is the love of our environment.

We love our oak-studded hillsides, creeks, clean air and relative lack of serious traffic problems. These issues and others now hang in the environmental balance with the board's tentative approval.

The underlying question is this: What could possibly be the reason for wanting to saddle the residents of this county with such a legacy? If Katcho thinks his vote won't be an albatross in future runs for public office, he's wrong.

Also, in today's economic meltdown, there may be some movement in the housing market as homes are foreclosed upon, devalued and become somewhat affordable. But that isn't nearly the case for million-dollar-plus mini-mansions. So who are the people who will buy the 111 homes on 1-acre ranchettes in the first phase?

Former target audiences would have been retiring baby boomers with fat portfolios. Yet the stock market appears to have dealt those folks a monetary sock to the jaw. And are banks even lending on luxury homes these days?

Finally, make no mistake, this isn't a development, this is a city that's in the works. Wineries, 400 homes, golf course, dude ranches, restaurants, craft studios, galleries, shops and livestock sales yard and other facilities could follow the first phase.

With its 11 environmental problems that can't be mitigated, this project deserves a full vetting on each of those issues — if only to definitively explain why this project has overriding considerations of public benefit — as required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

As it stands, if the board gives final approval on this project Dec. 16, it will end up in court.

There's time to reconsider, Katcho; don't leave this as your legacy. As a cockeyed optimist, one can only hope.