

Editorial: Project too massive for hasty OK

Board of Supervisors should continue hearing on Santa Margarita Ranch proposal to January

Today, the county Board of Supervisors has a second chance to review the Santa Margarita Ranch project. We urge it to take advantage of that opportunity by rethinking its earlier, hasty approval of this major development.

The board should continue the matter to the new year. That would allow a newly seated Board of Supervisors to give the project the time and attention it warrants, given its massive scope.

Here's what's on the table: There are 111 estate-style homes proposed for the first phase, but the development could ultimately include 500 additional homes plus wineries, a golf course, a guest ranch, restaurants and shops, churches and several other amenities.

As we've said before, we fully support some level of development on the property. But we don't believe enough effort has been made to forge a compromise that would allow a development that's financially feasible for the applicants, while addressing concerns about traffic, water use, loss of oak trees, loss of agricultural land, harm to wildlife and other negative effects.

We're concerned, too, that granting approval of this first phase could make any future phases that much easier to rubber-stamp.

At the last hearing, two county supervisors — Jim Patterson and Bruce Gibson — requested more time to deliberate.

Patterson noted that there were 21 inconsistencies between the county's General Plan and the proposal, and he wanted time to work with developers to resolve those. Gibson pointed out that he had not even had time to review some of the voluminous legal and planning documents that had been recently submitted by applicants.

Given the circumstances, it seems reasonable to grant the request for more time — and it's not too late to do that.

Yes, the project has been in the works for years, and the applicants deserve an answer.

But we also believe that both the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors have an obligation to give the proposal a full and fair hearing, and to give the public adequate opportunity to take part.

We don't believe that's been the case with the Santa Margarita Ranch project.

While the Planning Commission held several hearings on the project, the time of the final hearing was changed at the last minute — too late to notify the general public. That's inexcusable.

The project was then forwarded to the Board of Supervisors, which scheduled the first hearing on Election Day — but then had only about an hour to devote to it because of a packed agenda.

The board continued the meeting to another date and reached a decision after a marathon, nine-hour session. That may sound like a long time, but to put it in perspective, we've seen the board spend an hour or more debating how many parking spaces a small condominium project should be required to install.

We urge Supervisors Katcho Achadjian, Jerry Lenthall and Harry Ovitt to reconsider their earlier approval and continue the hearing until January.

Too much is at stake here to allow this project to pass with anything less than a rigorous review.