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HOLDING THE LINE

By Supervisor Federal Glover

EAST Contra Costa County residents are being inundated with slick campaign fliers, newspaper ads and a proliferation of political signs urging the expansion of their city limits, which would alter the county-imposed growth boundary known as the Urban Limit Line.

Three cities are seeking to redraw the urban limit line for development that would add thousands of new homes through local measures: Measure K in Antioch, Measure L in Brentwood and Measure P in Pittsburg.

In the 1960s and 1970s, new houses were being constructed to accommodate the thousands of new residents seeking the good life in the suburbs. The first cities to feel the impact of the building boom were the cities in Central County. As Walnut Creek, Pleasant Hill and Concord built out, developers sought new land to continue their building frenzy.

At first, East Contra Costa cities welcomed the building boom with open arms but the impact of thousands of new residents soon revealed a dark side of growth. Schools couldn't be built fast enough; the nature of the area began to change from small, self-sustaining towns where everybody knew everybody to bedroom communities where people barely knew their neighbors and spent a major part of their time commuting to their jobs located out of the area.

Good-paying jobs did not follow the people to East County. New businesses were reluctant to locate here because they didn't want their delivery trucks and products stuck on Highway 4 traffic jams. Built for the underestimated projections of the 1950s, Highway 4 was overwhelmed with suburban commuters. The result is the daily gridlock we experience today.

Meanwhile, people in Central County began to look around and they didn't like the transformation of their community into the poster child for suburban sprawl. In 1990, when the urban limit line was first introduced, Contra Costa voters voted for it overwhelmingly. County residents clearly did not want to continue the Los Angelization of the area.

Unfortunately, the growth boundary did not slow down the building frenzy and resulting sprawl. The first ULL was too generous to the cities and developers took advantage of that flaw. Builders saw the passage of the ULL as permission to build right

to the edge of that boundary. Thousands of new homes were approved even though much of the land was outside city limits. Seeing what was happening, the Board of Supervisors used the discretion given to them by the 1990 vote, tighten the growth boundary so that it closely aligned with the city limits. It is this line that is being challenged by developers' initiatives this Nov. 8.

In their measures, the developers promise a small percentage of the annexed parcels would remain open space but under the present urban limit line, all those lands are already protected from development.

Developers say they want to give the cities local control but who is really in control? Builders in Brentwood, Antioch and Pittsburg want to punch holes in the line for the sole purpose of building more homes.

The current boundary does not stop development. It provides for a review every five years to see if enough houses are being built to satisfy 20-year projections. The line can be shifted if land is needed to meet future needs. In fact, it encourages cities to continue to build on the undeveloped land already within the cities' own boundaries.

Realty expert James McMaster of Colliers International, said in his recent study of approved residential subdivisions for Antioch, Brentwood, Oakley and Pittsburg, he counted about 28,000 projects that have already been approved and are in the various stages of permits and construction. That translates to about 90,000 new residents. The cars from those new residents alone will overwhelm an already congested Highway 4, the main access road out of the region. Even with widening, Highway 4 would remain a parking lot during commute hours.

Developers' plans in the proposed annexations would add about 5,000 new homes to that number.

Just as the oil crisis forced the auto industry to design fuel-efficient cars, the crisis we face is forcing us to rethink the way we plan our cities. The old way of seeking the path of least resistance and allowing sprawl won't do anymore. It is time for a new way of planning that puts human beings as the measuring stick, not the automobile or the developers' dollar.

Vote "No" on Measures L, K and P!

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