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Antagonists face off in debate over controversial land-use blueprint roiling Marin County

By: Richard Halstead – May 30, 2013

Some policy wonks Thursday night were calling it the "Thrilla in Marin-illa," as two proponents of Plan Bay Area faced off against two opponents at the Marin Civic Center in San Rafael.

More than 200 people packed the county supervisors' chambers for the sixth and final local public meeting to discuss the controversial, new long-range, land-use blueprint for the Bay Area. The plan has ignited controversy in Marin with a coalition of neighborhood groups calling itself Citizen Marin opposing it, and another group of residents, Concerned Marinites to End NIMBYism, defending the plan.

The team defending the plan Thursday night consisted of Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey and Napa County Supervisor Mark Luce.

The opposing viewpoint was presented by Randal O'Toole of the Cato institute, author of "Gridlock"; and Thomas Rubin, an Oakland-based transportation consultant and former chief financial officer of the Southern California Rapid Transit District. Marin County Superior Court Judge Verna Adams served as moderator and referee.

It was clear from the first — when Adams asked the audience to demonstrate by a show of hands whether they favored or opposed the plan — that the overwhelming majority of the crowd was dead set against it. Many waved placards that read: "No project."

"We're not changing any minds here," Kinsey said, adding that he welcomed a "lively conversation."

Citizen Marin asserts that the plan robs local jurisdictions of control over land use decisions and will result in high-density apartment developments that will damage Marin's pristine natural environment and small-town character. Concerned Marinites to End NIMBYism counters that opponents are really worried that the creation of higher-density, more affordable housing will attract lower-income, more ethnically diverse residents to the county.

The two-hour meeting began with each of the four panelists giving a 10-minute presentation. Luce, who went first, emphasized that unlike current state requirements for cities and counties to facilitate certain levels of new housing development with their zoning laws, Plan Bay Area relies on cities and counties to voluntarily rezone.

"This is a plan that asks local governments to nominate areas where they think housing should go," Luce said.

Between now and 2040, the plan would channel 80 percent of housing growth and 66 percent of job growth into 170 "planned development areas," or PDAs, scattered throughout the Bay Area. PDAs are sites that have been identified voluntarily by cities or counties as areas for future growth.

Luce noted that as a result of Plan Bay Area, towns and cities in Marin will have significantly lower housing targets to meet between 2014 and 2022. That is because additional housing will be created in PDAs in other parts of the Bay Area, which have volunteered to accept the housing.

Luce also explained that the plan was developed as a response to a state law passed in 2008 that requires each of California's 18 metropolitan areas to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks. According to an environmental impact report prepared for the plan, its implementation would prevent an additional 1.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide from being spewed into the atmosphere annually by 2040.

During his presentation, Rubin acknowledged that the law requires the Bay Area to reduce greenhouse gas production to 1990 levels by 2020.

But Rubin said, "The good news is we may have already met that target. Even if we do nothing new, we will meet it."

Rubin said the plan contains unrealistic financial assumptions and ignores a long history of cost overruns for mass transit projects.

Later in the evening, Rubin said that when other nations such as Sweden and France created high density housing similar to what is contemplated by Plan Bay Area, the housing was occupied primarily by immigrants. Rubin said the neighborhoods became so dangerous that "even the police won't go there."

"I really don't want to see that happen here," Rubin said.

O'Toole said the plan would result in the construction of "a lot of second class housing, for second class people, who would go to work on second class transportation — and if you don't like it, you're accused of being a racist."

O'Toole said he opposes government planning because it can't anticipate technological changes such as the computer-guided cars that are being developed by Google.

"By 2040, the vast majority of cars are going to be self-driving," O'Toole said. "Many nine-year-old kids will be driving around. I'll put my dog in a car and send him to the vet."

Like Luce, Kinsey also stressed that Plan Bay Area doesn't require cities or counties to accept PDAs.

"This is not a shove it down your throat plan," Kinsey said. "It does not force stack-and-pack housing. It doesn't suggest that one size fits all."

Kinsey challenged opponents of the plan to come up with a better way of accommodating the additional 2 million people expected in the Bay Area by 2040 without generating more suburban sprawl.

He said, "What is the big better idea? I haven't heard it."