

Editorial: Elk Grove's growth plan is an overreach

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Elk Grove's proposed south county land grab should concern all the region's residents.

That area, envisioned by Elk Grove as a "sphere of influence" for future annexation, includes important farmland and one of the richest wildlife areas in the continental United States, as anyone who has seen sandhill cranes and wintering raptors can attest. The Deer Creek/Cosumnes River basin also is an important groundwater recharge area and floodplain.

Sacramento County has been striving to rein in sprawl by concentrating growth in areas that are already urban. To that end, the county has an "urban services boundary" – the limit to which public water and sewer service will be provided. That boundary "defines the ultimate 'footprint' for urban development" and "is intended to be permanent, allowing modification only under extraordinary circumstances," the county says.

Elk Grove has plenty of land to accommodate jobs and housing and should not needlessly breach the urban services boundary. This city had 2,000 vacant homes in 2009, and among the highest office and retail vacancy rates in the region. Expansion is unnecessary.

The city should withdraw its application and, if it does not, the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission, which decides such requests, should reject it. The best option before the commission is the "no project/existing general plan" alternative, where boundaries would continue to be existing Elk Grove city limits.

Of the proposed 7,900-acre expansion, the city says 6,800 acres are "designated for urbanization" – 4,500 acres for housing and 2,300 acres for retail, office and industrial sites. It argues that "urban growth in this area is appropriate and would likely occur over the next 20 years."

The city claims that Sacramento Area Council of Governments' 2035 projections justify the need for more land. Yet SACOG wrote in a May 2011 letter that it does not believe any additional acres outside the Elk Grove city limits are needed through 2035.

Further, a close look at the numbers in a December 2010 market study by the Center for Strategic Economic Research, commissioned by Elk Grove, shows that the city has more than enough land through 2029.

The city has 800 acres of developable vacant retail, office and industrial land, when even under a high-demand scenario it would need only 500 acres. Where does the city find a need for 2,300 acres?

Elk Grove has 2,100 acres of developable vacant land for housing. The study forecasts a need for 2,100 acres under a "low-demand" scenario, which seems highly optimistic given Elk Grove's foreclosure crisis. Where does the city find a need for 4,500 acres?

Elk Grove, and LAFCO, should exercise restraint in slating new lands for housing to avoid creating another housing bubble.

The city's real problem, as the 2010 study indicated, is: "There is minimal land use cohesion within existing development in the city and no true community core." Elk Grove needs to concentrate on working within existing acres and boundaries to make a better community.

LAFCO's mission is to promote logical formation of boundaries, discourage urban sprawl and preserve prime agricultural lands.

The Elk Grove proposal goes against that.

This isn't just about Elk Grove. This is about setting a bad precedent for unnecessary expansion that also breaches the urban services boundary. At the 5:30 p.m. meeting on April 4 at 700 H St. in Sacramento, residents should urge LAFCO to reject this developer-driven wish list.

The Bee's past stands

Elk Grove still has growth dreams that don't jibe with reality. ... [A] better solution would be to simply withdraw the expansion application.

That's unlikely, however, in a city that has made developer-driven expansion its mantra. ... County supervisors, who get big contributions from developers, should not go along with Elk Grove's attempted south county land grab."

– April 16, 2010