

Opinion: Combating housing and anti-growth

By Joe Mathews

Ventura County is the most glorious and verdant of California kingdoms.

Just ask its princes and princesses—those fortunate enough to be able to afford to live and vote there. The nearly 900,000 residents can pretend that they live in the country, with parks or farmland always nearby. The Kingdom of Ventura's cities remain separate developments on the landscape—they haven't sprawled and melted into each other, like cities do elsewhere in Southern California.



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Their secret? “No other county in the United States has more effective protections against urban sprawl,” says the website of SOAR, aka Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources, a family of growth-controlling ballot measures.

Those SOAR protections have been fixed in the laws of the county and its cities for two decades. SOAR effectively permits development only within certain urban cores in the county and makes no allowances for population growth. If you want to develop protected open space or change the development boundaries, you need a vote of the people.

Ventura voters like the results so much they are expected to extend the SOAR protections through 2050 in the November elections.

In effect, they've made their Kingdom a mighty fortress. Those sprawling suburban housing developments that fill the San Fernando Valley to the east? They stop at the county's edge. It's almost as if Ventura County has built a wall against growth along its border—and made neighboring Los Angeles pay for it.

But there is a problem with that wall, and within the Kingdom. The princes and princesses of the Kingdom have enjoyed the benefits of anti-growth—while avoiding the related responsibilities.

Smart growth strategies like SOAR are not only supposed to preserve open space. They also are supposed to drive more creative, dense, multifamily and transit-oriented development in the urban cores where growth is still permitted.

But such infill development in Ventura County has lagged far behind what's needed to serve the Kingdom's growing population and its housing needs. The same citizens of the Kingdom who back SOAR also have opposed multifamily and denser developments, and resisted transit investments to connect their cities.

The results are as obvious as the choking traffic on the 101 Freeway and housing prices that make Ventura County one of the country's least affordable places. The lack of housing for middle- and lower-income people forces them to commute from outside the county; and it makes it hard for companies to grow and locate there.

“There is an uncertain capacity within our urban boundaries to accommodate job growth,” Bruce Stenslie, president of the Economic Development Collaborative of Ventura County, said during a conference on SOAR. “Which doesn't mean that we

should tear down the urban boundaries, it means we need to be a little more mature about questions concerning in-fill development and higher density.”

Matthew Fienup, an economist with Cal Lutheran University’s Center for Economic Research and Forecasting, who talks about the joys of living across the street from orchards, says there are myriad ways to require more regular analysis and adjustments of the boundaries. Fienup suggests that the county would be better off establishing tradable development rights that would protect the same amount of land while bringing some flexibility to the boundaries.

Of course immaturity about growth—and high housing prices and traffic—is not limited to Ventura County.

But in its resistance to infill development, Ventura is an example of the California disease—grab your piece of the Kingdom, and keep out anyone who might come after you.

Local anti-growth bias is becoming a major statewide issue as California faces a crisis in housing affordability and availability—for anyone but the most affluent. To push back against anti-growth local communities, Gov. Jerry Brown is championing legislation that would exempt many urban housing developments from environmental or local government review.

Many localities have responded to this statewide push defiantly, via local ballot measures that block growth and housing, as the *Voice of San Diego* documented recently. The most reactionary of these ballot initiatives comes from Santa Monica, which would require a vote of the people on most developments taller than two stories.

The defense of those backing anti-growth measures is disingenuous: If you don’t like restrictions, you can go to the ballot. But that argument is an invitation for development to be determined by a showdown between NIMBY demagoguery and self-interested political money, as opposed to any rational

long-range planning.

One lesson from Ventura County is that growth boundaries like SOAR shouldn't be pursued in isolation. They need to be tied to rock-solid requirements for creating more housing in urban cores, both for low-income and middle-income people.

So if a county wants to protect open space from development, great. But it must be compelled to open gates in its walls big enough to bring much more progressive development into the Kingdom.

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