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Forum discusses county's future

By SARAH ELIZABETH
VILICANA
THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

Will ongoing general plan updates in for both Tulare County and Porterville help communities thrive in the next 25 years?

An expert panel offered different views on the best ways for local government to promote community development at "The Future of Growth in Tulare County," a town hall forum Wednesday night at Porterville College.

Several dozen local residents and college students attended the forum to hear from a panel representing the City of Porterville, the Tulare/Kings Home Builders Association and local non-profit and community-based organizations.

Sitting as the panel experts for Wednesday's forum:

► Jeff Steen, local citrus farmer and member of Tulare County Citizens for Responsible Growth.

► Robert Keenan, President and CEO of Home Builders Association of Tulare/Kings Counties.

► Brad Dunlap, Community Development director for the City of Porterville.

► Phoebe Seaton, Directing Attorney for the Delano office of California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Developer impact fees and affordable housing; the Valley's deteriorating water supply and current trends in city planning were among the major issues addressed by audience members and the guest panel.

Currently, Tulare County does not impose impact fees to pay for growth but the county is studying such fees as part of its General Plan update.



RECORDER PHOTO BY CHIEKO HARA

The Future of Growth in Tulare County forum was held Wednesday at Porterville College.

Dunlap said many of the county's unincorporated communities such as Strathmore, Plainview and Tonyville, would benefit from impact fees.

"Many of the villages and hamlets are under served when it comes to infrastructure," Dunlap. "You can encourage growth in those hamlets and villages or just enlarge an area that's already impoverished."

Representing local builders, Keenan argued that excessive impact fees push housing costs up and out of reach for many would-be home buyers.

Still on the topic of affordable housing, Dunlap discussed Porterville's plans to create more mixed-use developments where residents would live above stores and other commercial businesses. The idea is part of a trend in planning policy which focuses on "neo-traditional walkable communities."

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BRAD DUNLAP
Porterville Community Development Director

"There is a major movement where people are looking back and saying maybe we didn't do too bad back before the 1950's," Dunlap said. "The city is working on the framework for development that allows for options."

"Like what we had with the Porterville Hotel, but I don't want to go into that," Dunlap added in jest.

With growth as the topic of the evening, an audience member asked the panel how the county can strive for growth with such a finite water supply.

Keenan pointed to Senator Dave Cogdill's SB 59,

to provide funding for additional water storage capacity.

"There's several things we're looking at," Dunlap said. "There's the treatment of poor quality water, blending of services and treatment of wastewater."

One audience member asked the one question that has likely crossed the mind of every Porterville resident — why can't residents purchase a decent book without having to shop Online or drive to Visalia?

The answer, according to Dunlap, is demographics. He said despite city efforts to encourage book stores to come to Porterville; low income households and low education levels are not appealing to corporate bookstores or local business owners.

► Contact Sarah Elizabeth Villicana at 784-5000, Ext. 1045 or svillicana@portervillerecorder.com.