

Opinion

Editor's letter

Slow-growth advocates prevail in two key votes



By Jeff Fairbanks

In case you dozed through last week — stretching that holiday — you might have overlooked what could be a watershed week in recent county history.

It took a year and a half, but the slow-growth majority on the Board of Supervisors finally flexed its muscles.

It tightened a law to restrict development of farm land and said no to extra state water, all in a span of two days.

The decisions shouldn't really be a surprise to anyone. There was no mistaking where David Blakely, Evelyn Delany and Bud Laurent stood on growth issues compared to their opponents in the last elections. They all won handily and they followed their philosophy in the two key votes last week.

There's certain to be some backlash to both decisions, but this time it will be developers who cry they've been cut out of the political process.

The political process is often slow and cumbersome, but it appears this time real politics in this county is matching the mood of the people.

There was no doubt a majority of people wanted growth slowed two years ago and a coalition of them put a measure on the ballot. It lost by 1,800 votes out of more than 54,000 after opponents threw a watered-down version into the hopper to confuse the issue.

The board put its foot down last fall when it vetoed a mega-millionaire's plans for a conference center and golf course in the middle of the Chorro Valley.

The vote was 3-2, but that most likely would've been the case if Bill Coy had remained on the board instead of being replaced by Laurent. Coy had spoken out against any change from agriculture to golf greens there several years earlier.

The votes by the board members last week, however, emphatically reaffirmed their commitment to making the county live within its means and resources.

Not too long ago, various cities and communities had an eye on 29,000 acre-feet of water from the State Water Project, even though the county was entitled to only 25,000 acre-feet.

But when it came time to ante up by last week's deadline, only 7,700 acre-feet was spoken for. That's because a number of cities decided the price was too high or that they really didn't need state water.

That 7,700 figure could drop by another 3,000 if San Luis Obispo holds a special election and voters are successful in reversing the City Council's decision to buy into state water.

What's not so surprising is that after so many cities decided to let state water go by, developers were lining up to get any leftovers. And for years we'd been told state water wouldn't be "growth-inducing."

The board simply said no to them.

Some requests were ludicrous. The California Valley Community Services District wanted as much as it could get so the desert could bloom (turn 6,000 lots into a suburb of Pozo.)

The Santa Margarita Ranch, which claimed a few years ago it had enough water for 2,300 homes, was waiting for 500 acre-feet even though its proposal is down to 300 to 500 homes.

La Lomita Ranch was in the market for 1,600 acre-feet — compared to Morro Bay's request for 1,313 for itself — to turn a horse ranch into a convention center/corporate suites/golf course.

So does a vote make a difference? Well, the 3-2 votes last week certainly will change the rate and type of development in this county for a long time.

They also sent a message to developers — those outside developers with plans for projects in the tens of millions of dollars — that the home team is not going to give away the farm for a golf course.