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A new kind of stewardship

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By Karina Ioffee Staff Writer

Hollister - Imagine county roads that aren't congested with cars, houses in the vicinity of shopping centers and sensitive environmental lands forever protected from development. Sound like an impossible dream? Not if you ask Len Materman, a director of a Bay Area nonprofit who is leading a new project he says will benefit San Benito County as it grapples with how to grow without severely impacting the environment.

On Thursday, Materman will present the idea - which essentially assigns values to rural land that developers must purchase - during the San Benito County Cattlemen's Association's annual meeting, hoping to drum up more support among land owners, developers and local officials.

The idea, called the Rural Land Stewardship Program, groups local land depending on its uses and gives each parcel a credit value, awarding more credits to land with valuable environmental properties such as water sources and endangered species. Then, when developers express an interest in purchasing land, they must first buy the land credits from a landowner to use as a down payment for their construction projects. The purpose of the program is to include all interested landowners and give them equal access to revenue no matter if their land is used for grazing, farming or endangered species habitat.

"Traditionally, what happens is either a landowner wins big by selling to a developer or they are completely shut out of the process because they are too far away from where the developer wants to build," said Materman, who heads America's River Communities, a group that works on land-use issues around the country.

Ray Becker, who has been living in San Benito County for the last year and works for developer DMB Associates, says the program is a worthwhile idea for the county and something it should seriously consider as it heads into the 21st century.

"A lot of the concepts of the program such as integrating agriculture and development and village clustering (meaning homes are not scattered) have been a part of our philosophy for years," said Becker.

If ever approved and implemented by the Board of Supervisors, the program would revolutionize how the county plans development. The county currently has a Transfer Development Credit Committee,



headed by Planning Director Rob Mendiola, that is researching a similar plan to apply development credits to protect local lands while encouraging steady development over the next several decades. The land stewardship program differs by focusing on all land instead of only residential property and uses more of a market-driven approach with selling the credits.

The credit system is voluntary, but Joe Morris, owner of T.O. Cattle Company, says local land owners stand only to gain from the program. Morris opposed Measure G, which aimed to preserve agricultural land in the county and was overwhelmingly defeated by voters, and says he found it unfair to landowners. However, he is pinning high hopes on the Rural Land Stewardship Program.

"I'm interested in finding other ways to develop that don't infringe on people's ability to own land," said the San Juan Bautista rancher.

The project is just the right antidote to the decades of sprawl that have created mini-cities where former agricultural lands used to be, Morris said. With the credits system, owners of land with a high value - such as with many natural resources or endangered species - would get more credits, which in turn would have to be purchased by developers wanting to develop anywhere else in the county.

"What this is about is the idea that all land has value," said Morris. But with many landowners facing pressure to sell, "we need to pay people to not develop land."

One negative result of the stewardship program, however, could be a rise in home prices, if developers have to pay more to access lands and then pass the costs to buyers. Materman doesn't deny that could happen, but also points out that home prices may actually be lowered because developers face less risk of loss to their investment and litigation.

"The thing that developers hate is putting money up front for a long process in which the end result is uncertain," he said. That's because before a developer can build, costly environment reviews must be conducted, which consequently might not rule in the company's favor.

Home price increase could become an issue, said Supervisor Anthony Botelho, who is also a landowner, but added that saving local lands from development was worth the risk.

"If we are going to promote the preservation of agricultural lands, we have to pay for it," said Botelho. "There is a value to living in a rural community."

The program has been used successfully in Florida, where it helped protect 90,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands and kept development contained to just 10 percent of the county.

If enough support is gathered in the county, the project would eventually have to be adopted by the Board of Supervisors, before it goes into effect.

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