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Can a growth plan please everyone?

Landowners and environmentalists could be satisfied by an innovative land stewardship program

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In our kitchen-table debates over this county's growth, many are quick to defend our "pro growth" or "slow growth" views. We stand on opposite sides of the fence without acknowledging that, perhaps, there is no fence.

Maybe we all want the same thing.

"We all have a similar vision," said Richard Saxe, an advocate for slow growth who's trying to find a common ground with the so-called other side. "But if you can separate yourself from the community and focus on your personal desires—and what you, personally, want to get out of it—you start to factionalize."

If the growth debate were a romantic novel, those factions would emerge in chapters melodramatically named "Divisions of Measure G" or "The Great Hilltop Ordinance Debate." Controversy sells, but some are ready for a truce.

"If you can get everyone at the table talking, I think these things can get worked out," Saxe said. "But that's the tough thing, getting everyone at the table."

That's where Len Materman joins the story.

He's becoming known locally as the man with the stewardship plan, an idea he argues will satisfy landowners, environmentalists and developers.

It's called the Rural Lands Stewardship Program, and the premise is this: development shouldn't compete with conservation.

Under the program, community members decide which land they want to preserve untouched, and which land will be developed. Landowners outside of the development area are paid not to develop their land, and once they sell their development credits, their land is theoretically protected forever, even if it's sold. The program is entirely voluntary.

Sound familiar? The stewardship program is similar to transfer development credits, or TDCs, an idea that's been floating around this county for more than a year. But there are two

main differences with the stewardship program: first, all types of development, not just residential, are included in the credit program; and second, all land is not created equal.

Imagine you own 40 acres of land, and a developer wants to buy your credits to build an industrial park within the county's 'development zone,' which has been designated by a committee of residents and approved by the board of supervisors.

Now comes the math. Your property is 60 percent agricultural land and 40 percent wetlands. Members of the stewardship group—which would be open to anyone interested in the program—have decided that wetlands is the most valuable type of land, so after plugging a few numbers into the calculator, your acreage isn't worth 1 credit, but 1.3 credits, thanks to the added value of the wetlands. Multiply those credits by the market value of the land, say \$30,000 per acre, and net \$1.56 million if you sell your credits; that's more than the \$1.2 million value of the land.

The appeal to landowners is obvious, and the crowd was all smiles when Materman presented the program at the annual county Cattlemen's Association meeting a few weeks back.

But environmentalists should also be pleased, Materman said. In Collier County, Fla., where a pilot program has been underway since 2002, 90 percent of land within the program's 195,000-acre sphere will be permanently protected as open space or ag land.

Developers would also benefit, he argues, as the community's foresight will streamline projects.

"If we can keep these three constituencies seeing the bottom line for them, then that's what gives me hope that this thing will be different," Materman said.

"It's really important to get a plan that most people can live with most of the time," said Mary Ellen Dick, an ag water-quality coordinator who helps farmers, ranchers and environmentalists work together to improve the region's water quality.

Six months ago, Dick was introduced to Materman, who began promoting the stewardship program while working on a federal conservation task force in Washington, D.C. They talked, and Dick recommended he share the details with San Benito.

"It's very much like the water-quality work we're doing," she said. "How do we come together and ask what is it we're really trying to accomplish?"

She led Materman to Joe and Julie Morris, cattle ranchers who are helping create Vision San Benito, an organization intended to help the various factions create a long-range plan for the county. The Morrises were impressed, as were some members of the county's TDC group, whose members' opinions run the gamut of the growth debate.

Materman hasn't met with local environmentalists as a group, though Saxe, who befriended fellow slow-growth advocates through the "Yes on G" efforts, has emailed them a synopsis of the program.

"I don't think there would be the impression that we've tried to divide and conquer different groups, or felt like first we were going to one side, then the other side," Materman said.

All sides will be present Wednesday at the next Vision San Benito meeting when Materman makes another presentation. The group, which has filled 27 of 30 seats that represent everyone from realtors to local artists, has already identified agriculture and natural resources as top priorities, according to Julie Morris.

Saxe will be there, too, as the group's slow-growth representative. During the battle of Measure G, which was defeated by 67 percent last March, the growth-control initiative's opponents argued that controlled growth was imperative, but a better plan was needed. A handful of advocates from either side formed Vision San Benito to further that goal before the dust settled.

"They're talking the talk and walking the walk," Saxe said. "In the process of creating a vision, it's not just sitting with a group of like-minded people, deciding what you want and then going to battle about it."

Perhaps the stewardship program will help turn the factions into partnerships. Perhaps not.

Florida's Collier County is the sole experiment and because the county commissioners adopted the program in 2002, long-term effects won't be seen for years. The committee behind the program's creation represented varying interests—including landowners, developers, the county's Audubon Society and the Florida Wildlife Federation—yet the program affects only a handful of landowners, according to the principal planner in Collier's Comprehensive Planning Department, Glenn Heath.

The 195,000 acres within the program are owned by a small number of landowners, most of whom are also developers who want to develop a portion of their land while preserving the rest.

"That was probably a unique situation. They were able to bring the majority of the property owners to the table," said Heath. "I'm sure that helped move this along."

Another segment of the county is not part of the program, including a large number of landowners, each owning smaller parcels, who participate in a program similar to TDCs. Furthermore, only three landowners eligible to sell credits have signed on, said Heath, the chief planner. It also cost \$800,000 in consultant fees and other start-up costs to organize and promote the program.

Yet whether or not the stewardship plan moves forward, it appears to do what former growth-related ideas have failed to do: offer something for everyone.

"If the community is so ripe for change that they just want to do things really differently, and if they're interested in doing the (stewardship program) process and including it in the General Plan, they should implement all the tools out there that are consistent with the community-wide master planning," Materman said.

This latest chapter will affect not only how the county develops its housing projects and industrial parks, but how the county develops as a community.

"Groups go through a storming-norming-forming," said Dick. "In the first round, everybody battles to make sure they feel understood. Then in the norming phase (they say), 'OK, how do we do this?' Then they form a group that can be productive."

Len Materman will present the Rural Lands Stewardship Program at the next Vision San Benito meeting on Wednesday, 6 p.m., at the Veterans' Memorial Building, 649 San Benito St. in Hollister. Everyone is welcome to attend.