

Brandon: A reality check on Provinsalia

Contributed by Victoria Brandon

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The Clearlake Planning Commission's unanimous decision to recommend approval of the Provinsalia subdivision seems to have been based on wishful thinking culminating in collective hallucination.

Encouraged by Dale Neiman, Clearlake's ordinarily astute city administrator, the commissioners concluded that this smoke-and-mirrors project would miraculously solve the city's fiscal dilemmas and provide badly needed infrastructure.

To achieve those goals they are apparently willing to disregard the many "significant and unavoidable" environmental impacts detailed in the environmental impact report, sacrifice an amazing pristine site that could become a treasure to the city second only to the lake itself, distort their own general plan, skate on the thin ice of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) legal violations, and encumber Clearlake with a viper's nest of future problems.

Let's have a little reality check.

This unimaginative, badly designed project takes hardly any advantage of the special qualities of the site, which lies just outside the Cache Creek Wilderness and borders the creek itself for more than a mile, but relies instead on a second-rate, money-losing nine-hole golf course to sell jammed-together houses on minimally-sized lots.

This is a pattern of development that was obsolescent a decade ago. Even during the heady days of our recent real estate bubble, a subdivision like this would attract few of the affluent buyers whose theoretically plump and open wallets are being advertised as one of the benefits Provinsalia would bring to a demographically challenged city.

To make this subdivision even less attractive to potential buyers, the lots would be burdened with the excessive costs of sprawl. Extending infrastructure to a site remote from public services would require substantial new water treatment facilities, a sewer upgrade estimated to cost a minimum of \$13 million and a completely new access road for which no budget has yet been provided, quite aside from the streets, gas lines, electric lines, recreational facilities and other infrastructure on the project site itself.

Some of these costs would be reflected in the purchase price of the lots, and others carried as permanent maintenance district fees assessed on residents. Collectively, these charges would put Provinsalia at a hopeless competitive disadvantage compared to residential properties elsewhere in Clearlake and in other parts of Lake County.

To make matters worse, the parlous state of the American economy has led to an extraordinarily tight credit market and a wave of foreclosures that is not expected to crest any time soon. Many of Provinsalia's potential customers – affluent retirees from the Bay Area – currently own houses that have decreased drastically in value, with no purchasers in sight. The few who still intend to relocate to our community can find a plethora of attractive homes available at fire sale prices in Hidden Valley and elsewhere in the county, leaving them with no incentive whatsoever to pay a large premium for a less desirable property in Provinsalia.

The conclusion seems obvious to anyone whose judgment has not been clouded by a haze of imaginary dollar signs: Provinsalia will never be built, and the project site will become the latest example of Lake County's many paper subdivisions.

As long as regulations preventing grading, tree-cutting and other on-site environmental degradation are properly enforced, this end result would ordinarily be of little consequence. The temporary maps would lapse after a few years, the developers would figure out some way to write off their losses and the whole episode would become a footnote to Clearlake's history.

But in this case project approvals have been structured in a way that would result in long-term distortion of the city's general plan, its "constitution" governing growth: even if this project is abandoned, any deviation from the tiresome design outlined in the 70-page specific plan would require a subsequent general plan amendment and full CEQA review.

Not even such a minor alteration as the repeatedly suggested alternative design replacing the golf course with a more natural rural landscape incorporating hiking, biking, and equestrian trails would be possible without amending the general plan, much less anything like the innovative "eco-destination" suggested in Debi Sally's LakeCoNews letter of Dec. 10 (<http://lakeconews.com/content/view/6599/770/>).

Clearlake residents whose sanity remains unclouded should act now to keep this planning albatross from being hung around the neck of a city that has more than enough problems already. Please contact Mayor Chuck Leonard and Councilors Judy Thein, Joyce Overton, Curt Giamb Bruno, and Roy Simon and urge them to reject this misguided and ultimately destructive project.

Victoria Brandon is chair of the Sierra Club Lake Group.

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