

Santa Maria Times July 30, 2008, guest editorial

Don't give up on Gaviota coast

In a recent column Andy Caldwell, the executive director of COLAB, postulates that the Gaviota Coast has been trashed, and we might as well finish the job. Campgrounds, a hotel, and a dump with an ocean view have all invaded the coast, to say nothing of the industrial oil facilities.

He suggests that we promote sprawl up the Gaviota Coast by ignoring our General Plan policies.

A little background about a proposed massive Gaviota Coast mansion will help you understand the tenuous nature of Caldwell's position.

The proposed Ballantyne mega-house sits on agricultural lands at the eastern gateway to the Gaviota Coast on a ridge a quarter mile from Highway 101. The metal and glass monstrosity for two people has 15,800 square feet of buildings, is longer than a football field, and is hidden behind a 6,000-cubic-yard wall of dirt 660 feet long and 10 feet high.

The house was rejected twice by the Board of Architectural Review, who simply advised the owner to redesign and re-site the home on the lot to fit with the surrounding landscape and avoid violating the most basic of General Plan policies.

Rather than reconfigure the house, Ms. Ballantyne and her husband, Randy Welty, chose to fight. The county relaxed standards, waived fees and expedited special treatment for this monster house. Ironically, that special treatment led to the processing errors that will land this project in court.

County General Plan policies and zoning requirements provide uniform standards for all development - setting the rules for landowners and establishing expectations for surrounding communities.

The rural area General Plan policies that apply to this project state that structures: 1) shall be sited so as not to intrude into the skyline as seen from public viewing places, 2) shall be subordinate in appearance to natural landforms, 3) shall be designed to follow the natural contours of the landscape, 4) shall minimize cut and fill operations.

The Ballantyne project, as proposed, flunks all of these clear policies.

Caldwell claims that the developers of the property have had their property rights stolen. No one has ever claimed that the owners do not have a legal right to build on their property. However, they do not have a legal right to violate county policies.

The acreage they are building on is big enough to accommodate their oversized vision if appropriately sited, but they have chosen to ignore county policies.

The North County majority on the Board of Supervisors has voted to approve this project in clear violation of its own policies, defying the plain language of those policies.

This is government at its worst. The supervisors' action undermines the integrity and authority of legitimate county policy rather than protect the property rights of individuals. It exalts politics over law and policy, and demonstrates just how far Caldwell is willing to go to avoid playing by the rules.

Caldwell clearly does not understand the near-universal sentiment to protect the Gaviota landscape and its working ranches from the sprawl that is changing our landscape.

In the primary election for 3rd District supervisor, all of the candidates strongly endorsed the long-term preservation of the coast. Liberals and conservatives agreed that this is a one-of-a-kind landscape that demands protection.

While condemning the South County for “urban sprawl,” Caldwell promotes the systematic conversion of agricultural lands to meet the part-time residential needs of rich out-of-towners.

Gaviota has been a working landscape for decades, with farms, ranches, orchards, grazing lands, state parks and a scattering of modest houses. Lately, the out-of-town crowd has started buying up agricultural land and proposing McMansions on every hill.

Gaviota is at a crossroads. Caldwell urges that we ignore the history and culture of the Gaviota Coast, and the policies that have kept it special - that we throw open the door to sprawl.

But few long-term Gaviota landowners want that kind of development, and virtually everyone else in the county understands why the Gaviota Coast is special.

Every sitting supervisor has expressed affection for the coast. Supervisor Joni Gray has stated that the beaches on the Gaviota Coast are prized by her constituents. Supervisor Brooks Firestone said that protecting the Gaviota Coast “is a big one for me.” Supervisor Joe Centeno was born at the Naples townsite where his father worked for the railroad; the coast runs in his blood.

Caldwell is clearly out of touch.

Phil McKenna is a Gaviota Coast Conservancy board member.

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The above editorial was written in response to the editorial below written by COLAB's executive director Andy Caldwell which appeared in the Santa Maria Times in the week prior to the above editorial.

Slamming the door on property rights

When I was a kid, much of the South County was still being farmed. Nowadays, the area is one piece of urban sprawl. Like other areas of Southern California, it is difficult to discern where one town ends and another begins.

What is funny is the rhetoric coming from the South County about the need to preserve agriculture and open space. They are, of course, primarily talking about ag lands and open spaces elsewhere in the county, since they paved over the land they live on.

One of the places they seek to save is the coastline between the Gaviota tunnel and Goleta. Dubbed the Gaviota Coast, there is no small amount of rhetoric and propaganda being spewed forth to mobilize people to save this stretch of our coast. Save the coast from what? Development, of course.

This coastline is presented as the last bit of undeveloped coastline in all of Southern California. The truth is the area was developed a long time ago. Development of all kinds is scattered throughout this stretch of land.

Dozens of homes are concentrated in two gated communities, and one fairly large rural residential neighborhood. One of the poshest hotels in all of Southern California shares a strip of coastline alongside a golf course and an oil production facility.

At least four additional facilities developed for oil-related industrial uses dot the area. Then there are three state beaches, a couple of rest stops, and a fire station.

Did I mention the privately owned campgrounds, and the dude ranch/theatre? And the crown jewel of this virgin piece of coast? The dump that serves half the county's residents. Might be the only dump with an ocean view, for all I know.

The only thing I haven't mentioned is a couple of gas stations and a restaurant that were torn down, and the remaining shell of an elementary school.

Oh, I almost forgot the remains of the former WWII POW camp.

To present this area of our county as the last rural, pristine, undeveloped piece of coastline in Southern California is a stretch of imagination.

Recently, a family trying to build a home on their 17-acre parcel on a hill overlooking the freeway and the ocean, just barely outside the Goleta city limits, were held hostage by NIMBY neighbors and a bully with a law degree. The claims were the house would violate the county's policies protecting the views of ridgelines.

To ensure the house couldn't be seen from the freeway, as if that were a crime against humanity, the property owners volunteered to move the house back from the ridge and construct an earthen berm to shield the house from view.

Well, the lawyer then claimed the project had to undergo environmental review, because the project had been changed in the course of a public hearing. Even though single-family homes

are legally exempt from this requirement, the Board of Supervisors exercised caution and ordered a review to be done.

One year, \$50,000, and 65 pages of environmental review later, the study confirmed the berm did, in fact, hide the house from the freeway. The environmental attorney then argued the house could still be seen from roads on the hills above the project site.

In essence, selfish people who own property on the South Coast and are enjoying the same are trying to save the coast from their neighbors who haven't developed yet. This is not a noble venture. It is coveting of the worst kind. And quite frankly, I don't give a darn about saving the view for people driving the freeway.

Andy Caldwell is executive director of COLAB, and a 40-year resident of the Central Coast.