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Homebuilders spend big to fight El Dorado County slow-growth measures

Developer of Serrano El Dorado Hills spends \$577,400 against local initiatives
Measure E and Measure G seek to restrict subdivisions, commercial projects
Builders fund opposition committee pledging to 'protect water and open space' in rural county
Boulders border a lagoon on a former limestone quarry in El Dorado County, in 2013. Marble Valley Co. wants county zoning changes to build 3,235 homes and town houses on the site south of Highway 50.
Manny Crisostomo Sacramento Bee file

By Peter Hecht

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Major homebuilders are pouring more than \$575,000 into an El Dorado County campaign committee established to defeat two local slow-growth initiatives.

The contributors to the Committee to Protect El Dorado County Water and Open Space are developers who want to build more than 4,000 homes and town houses amid oak woodlands and on a former golf course in El Dorado Hills.

Development affiliates of Parker Development Co., builder of the Serrano El Dorado Hills community, have contributed \$577,400 in an effort to defeat Measure E and Measure G in the county of 184,000 residents.

Besides being the builder of the 4,700-home Serrano development, Parker is the parent company of Marble Valley Co. The affiliate wants county zoning changes to build 3,235 homes and town houses south of Highway 50 amid rolling hills, woodlands and the site of a former limestone quarry in El Dorado Hills.

Another Parker affiliate, Serrano Associates, wants to construct 1,028 homes and town houses on the site of a former public golf course in El Dorado Hills and at a second location in the community.

The projects have drawn vehement opposition from many residents, who claim they will disrupt the rural lifestyle and cause traffic gridlock in the county east of Sacramento County. Last year, El Dorado Hills voters rejected the golf course development idea 91 percent to 9 percent in a nonbinding advisory vote on whether to rezone the property to allow construction.

Now, professionally printed campaign signs along Highway 50 and rural roads in the county are calling for 'no' votes on measures E and G, written by slow-growth advocates to put severe restrictions on new subdivisions and large commercial projects.

The anti-initiative signs, paid for by the Parker development interests, read: "Farmers and Wineries Say No E & G – Protect Open Space."

Near many of the placards, slow-growth advocates have erected hand-written protest signs, reading: "Developer funded."

"I think it's very devious," said Sue Taylor, co-chair of a growth-control group called Save Our County, which is backing measures E and G. "Their signs should say that they want to develop our open space. They should be honest about their intent.

"People are getting ticked off. They're making their own signs because they're so angry about what the developers are doing."

Kirk Bone, director of governmental affairs for Parker Development, said the signs paid for by the developer represent a broad consensus of residents, including farmers and winery operators, who believe that land use planning by ballot initiative is a bad idea.

Bone said the county has a carefully crafted general growth plan that was written to protect the rustic environment while taking a measured approach to allowing residential and commercial construction. The plan was approved by voters in 2004 and later upheld by the courts.

Bone said the ballot measures "would basically end the general plan as we know it today.

"It affects everybody because there will be no general plan" if measures E and G pass, Bone said. "I think there is a lot of uncertainty as to what could happen or not. The impact is as simple as not being able to get a building permit, let alone a general plan amendment. This would all come to a halt."

Measure E would reverse a law, passed by voters in 2008, that gave supervisors authority to authorize construction of new county roads for major residential developments that contribute to traffic congestion. Such projects can be approved if four of five supervisors vote for the development plans.

Measure Y, passed in 1998, prohibited any approval of residential projects of five or more units that caused or worsened traffic gridlock. While Measure Y was reaffirmed by voters in 2008, it added the four-vote-majority exemption for supervisors to approve projects that increase traffic. Measure E would return the county standard to the 1998 language.

Meanwhile, Measure G seeks to preserve open-space buffers near agricultural or timber lands by amending the general plan to broaden distance requirements for residential, commercial or mixed-use developments. The measure would also prohibit projects from being built in some rural areas without public water sources. The general plan now allows such developments to connect to private water systems.

"A 'Yes' vote WILL NOT allow approval of new discretionary projects until the agricultural buffers are restored and existing policies that will protect our historical, cultural, water and recreational resources are implemented," the Yes on Measure G ballot argument reads.

Residents signing the ballot argument included Patricia Chelseth, owner of a small sheep farm in Shingle Springs called My Sister's Farm; Rod Pimental, owner of El Dorado Northern Lumber Company; and Dennis Smith, owner of Ranting Raven Fruits and Vegetables in Georgetown.

In an interview, Chelseth, who also supports Measure E, said she is hoping to protect the county's "bucolic" lifestyle while stopping housing developments, including a 1,000-home subdivision – called Mill Creek – that a developer is hoping to build in the Shingle Springs area.

"What's looming is traffic congestion and pollution," said Chelseth, who said proposed developments "all take water ... and that worries me as a farmer."

The argument against Measure G was signed by opponents including Placerville wine producer Alexis Boeger, vice president of the El Dorado Winery Association; El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce President Debbie Manning; and Jim Davies, president of the El Dorado County Farm Bureau.

"Measure G threatens El Dorado County water rights, jobs and our economy," their opposing argument said. "It could cost the county needed revenue and ... tie the county up in costly court battles for years."

Maryann Argyres, a Camino apple grower and opponent of both initiatives, said she isn't comfortable with the "big money" flowing in to defeat the measures. But she said measures E and G are wrong-headed and will actually hurt efforts to control traffic and allow sensible development.

"They are a total and complete over-reaction," she said. "It's the proverbial Chicken Little thing, saying, 'The sky is falling.' It is not falling."

Proponents of the initiatives, led by the Save Our County group, so far have not reported any campaign contributions.

The robust spending against the initiatives marks the second time in two years that developers have bankrolled opposition to growth-restricting measures in the county.

In 2014, Measure N would have imposed steep traffic improvement fees on subdivision builders while allowing county funds for improvements to Highway 50 for commercial projects. Measures M and O would have banned zoning changes for high-density housing projects and amended the general plan to restrict

new subdivision construction in Shingle Springs, Camino, Pollock Pines and parts of El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park.

All three 2014 initiatives lost by large margins. Building and real estate interests spent more than \$1 million to defeat them.

Besides the spending against measures E and G by Parker Development – and its affiliated Marble Valley Co. and Serrano Associates – the opposition took in \$20,000 from Doug Veerkamp, who runs a major construction engineering company in the county.

Another \$10,000 came in from Hal Freeman, the CEO of ECorp Consulting Inc., a Rocklin-based environmental consulting and landscape architecture firm for construction projects. Hefner, Stark & Marois, a Sacramento law firm specializing in real estate and land use, donated \$5,000, according to campaign reports.

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