



Editorial: It's time for supervisors to fix the Angwin bubble

February 26, 2014

For too long the future of Angwin has been the subject of vague land use policies, rumors, political campaigns, secretive and unsuccessful real estate negotiations and, most recently, litigation.

Now the time has come for a definitive legislative fix, as outlined in the Napa County General Plan.

The Napa County Board of Supervisors is expected to take up the issue in April, at the request of Supervisor Diane Dillon.

Changes in the land use designations of Pacific Union College's vast Angwin landholdings might legitimately require further study, and decisive action on such a controversial issue is always politically risky in an election year.

But that's no excuse for the board to punt. Supervisors should decide once and for all, as quickly as possible, whether Angwin is suitable for urbanization.

The current county General Plan, approved in 2009, did away with all of the county's "urban bubbles" — areas where agricultural land could be rezoned without a countywide Measure J vote — except the one in Angwin, where PUC had a project pending. The county took 400 of PUC's 500 acres out of the bubble, leaving 100 acres subject to development.

Mike Hackett and Volker Eisele of Save Rural Angwin told us they want the Board of Supervisors to downzone 100 acres of college land, currently designated Urban Residential, in such a way that would preclude the sort of large-scale housing development that SRA opposes, while recognizing Angwin's limited infrastructure, access and public transit.

They explained to us that their proposal is basically the same as what they were seeking in 2012 with Measure U, which voters defeated by a decisive 60-40 margin. They said the difference is that recent litigation has proven that PUC had been negotiating to sell its land to potential developers during the Measure U campaign.

SRA is essentially asking the Board of Supervisors to adopt a policy that voters rejected less than two years ago. That could be politically problematic, if not anti-democratic, but Hackett and Eisele believe the new information can lead to better decisions.

The Board of Supervisors shouldn't wait any longer to follow through on the 2009 General Plan's pledge to "Undertake a planning effort to re-evaluate areas of Angwin designated Urban Residential after June 2010, with the objective of re-designating areas to better reflect land uses existing or authorized at that time."

There are good reasons to act promptly. PUC's first few development plans have failed, but it has continued negotiations with potential developers, as shown by recent litigation between the college and Sustainable Community Partners, which was on the verge of a deal with the school that went sour last April. According to court documents, another buyer is waiting in the wings.

The preservation of the college is in the county's best interests, and the board can fix the Angwin bubble without trampling on the college's property rights or jeopardizing its long-term financial viability.

If PUC needs to raise cash to fund capital improvements, it could sell some of its land for vineyards. High-end vineyard operators have made offers ranging from \$50 million to \$75 million, according to court documents. That's more than the \$39.5 million PUC stood to make from the sale of land for residential use.

If the college needs housing for its faculty and staff, it could develop two parcels that have already been approved for 191 units.

Provided all parties negotiate transparently and in good faith, there's no reason the county couldn't strike a balance that would satisfy neighbors, protect PUC's long-term interests and recognize Angwin for what it is — a village, not a bubble.