



## **Alternative Proposal for Limits on House Size in the Rural Coastal Zone of San Mateo County Drafted by Lennie Roberts, Committee for Green Foothills**

March 2003

Under existing regulations of the County's Local Coastal Program (LCP), there are no clear, measurable limits on the size of houses built in the rural coastal zone. Instead, the LCP has vague, discretionary policies that are difficult to enforce. As a result, there is an increasing number of appeals of very large houses, which can delay the approval of a house two years or longer.

In January, 2002, the Board of Supervisors requested the San Mateo County Planning staff to address the trend for very large houses to be built in the rural areas of the coast. The Planning staff has proposed a limit or cap of 5,000 square feet for new single family dwellings in the agricultural, open space, and timber areas of the coastal zone. Some have argued that this is too restrictive.

As an alternative, the Committee for Green Foothills proposes that the county adopt the key provisions regarding house size that were in the 1994 Coastsides Protection Initiative. Citizens who circulated this voter initiative obtained more than 30,000 signatures of registered voters, but due to a printing error that resulted in two versions being signed, the initiative was not submitted to the county for a vote, and were therefore not adopted.

This proposal would allow more flexibility than the proposed cap of 5,000 square feet per house while ensuring that new houses would be reasonably in scale with existing houses in the coastal zone, and would better protect the scenic qualities of the coastside.

Under the existing LCP provisions, one density credit is required to build a single family dwelling. There are no defined, measurable limits on the size of houses, other than setbacks from property lines and height limits. Floor area limits, and/or lot coverage, which are now in place in most of the county's residential areas, do not have any practical effect on large rural parcels. Yet large houses in the rural, agricultural coastside can have negative visual impacts, can undermine the viability of agriculture, and can place unanticipated burdens on scarce water supplies, roads, and other rural services.

### **This alternative proposal would require one density credit for each 5,000 square feet of a new single family dwelling built in the rural coastal zone.**

- The density credit requirement would not apply to affordable housing units or farm labor housing.
- The density credit requirement would not apply to agricultural buildings such as barns, greenhouses, sheds, and other ag related outbuildings.
- Limits on square feet would not apply to basements.
- New houses built within a state or county scenic corridor would be limited to a maximum of 5,000 square feet (using one density credit). If the house site were outside the scenic corridor, a larger house could be built, using one or more additional density credits.

For parcels that have only one density credit, a landowner could still build a house larger than 5,000 square feet if the new house were located out of the scenic corridors and off prime soils. This would be through use of the existing density transfer provisions of the LCP.

Each density credit transferred would allow an additional 5,000 square feet of house to be built. The transferred density credits would come from:

- Parcels consisting entirely of prime soils, as per LCP Policy 5.11e, or
- Parcels where new density credits are created by constructing 24.5 acre feet of new off-stream agricultural water impoundments as per LCP Table 1.3.K.

This proposal has the benefit of creating additional potential uses for transferred density credits. Farmers and landowners who want to maintain prime soils in production, or who need to develop new water storage, would have a broader "market" for density credits, which could help pay for these improvements.

Having clear measurable standards would help applicants, planning staff, decision makers and the public all have a common understanding of the regulations, rather than arguing over discretionary policy language currently in the LCP. Enacting these standards would also avoid or eliminate costly and time-consuming appeals of large houses.