

# County sets growth limit at 0.5 percent

Reason behind need for guidelines unclear, as law hasn't had to flex muscles in decades

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SANTA CRUZ — Is Measure J obsolete?

Santa Cruz County's landmark 1978 law is seen as one of the founding documents of a local political revolution that fundamentally altered how the county views itself. After the slow-growth Measure J was adopted, the county began to distance itself from the building boom in Silicon Valley, and became the site of recurring development battles.

**The county's reputation appears to do much of the heavy lifting now when it comes to preventing too much development, but Gary Patton said Measure J still serves as a reminder that there is a limit to building here.**

But in recent years, the tools Measure J offers to limit growth seem to have become either ineffective or unnecessary.

On Tuesday, the county board set a new annual growth guideline of 0.5 percent — in line with past years, though a level that stretches the definition of "growth" — and it did so without so much as a peep from developers or environmentalists.

That's likely because Measure J hasn't directly impacted growth since the 1980s, when the county held lotteries for the finite number of market-rate permits available to builders. Low- and moderate-

income homes are exempt from the law.

"I wouldn't say that we're constraining growth in any sense," said Frank Baron, a county planner who prepared a report for the board to weigh prior to Tuesday's unanimous vote.

The county implements Measure J by establishing a cap on the number of building permits that can be issued annually. The idea is that with fewer dwellings, you have fewer people. And with fewer people come fewer traffic problems, less encroachment on open space, less pollution and so forth.

But the county hasn't hit that cap in about two decades. Perhaps more remarkable, population growth during that time sometimes exceeded the established growth rate, even when building permits were quite low.

In 2010, population in the unincorporated areas grew by 0.55 percent, besting the growth goal of 0.5 percent. But the allocation of 260 building permits went nearly untouched. Just 29 were used.

In 2009, population grew by 1.37 per-

## GROWTH

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cent over the prior year, again above the 0.5 percent growth guideline. And again, the permit allocation went essentially untapped — just 38 of the 260 available were issued.

To be sure, Santa Cruz County isn't exactly booming.

Over the past decade, annual population growth county-wide was just 0.26 percent, according to the U.S. Census. Meanwhile, the number of housing units increased by 0.55 percent annually — a figure that includes rapidly growing Watsonville.

But the numbers are enough to ask whether Measure J exists now as a mere symbol, its power having long ago been suffused into the county's Planning Department, and into its political values.

Gary Patton, a former county supervisor and the author of Measure J, said the law still has value. The county's repu-

tation appears to do much of the heavy lifting now when it comes to preventing overdevelopment, but Patton said Measure J still serves as a reminder that there is a limit to building here.

"It's kind of a fail-safe policy," Patton said.

"It basically is doing what it is supposed to be doing."