

Green Sheet

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The sky's no longer the limit

SO, NOW we have a "growth plan." After much unseemly tugging and hauling, the word has come down from the mountain — our fair county will grow at a rate not to exceed 2.5 percent in the urban areas and 1.9 percent in the rural areas. At present, the cities can grow as they wish for Proposition J, passed by the voters in June, applies only to the unincorporated areas.

Well, we shall see what we shall see.

While there were some comical aspects to the antics of the cast in the somewhat turgid growth limit drama which has been played out over the past several months, we, as the good queen said, are not amused. It's been a grim show, really, made grimmer by the heavy-handedness of the players. The most recent episode by the "hard hats" did nothing to distinguish that earnest group of hard-working people. Jamming the courthouse parking lot with building equipment and railing against welfare and UCSC was a tacky bit of theatrics, but it was in keeping with the general tone of the drama as a whole.

To say that contradictions abound in this matter is an understatement — perhaps the only one made since growth limits became an issue.

The proponents — that all-embracing group known as the Community Coalition — not only demanded that development be severely restricted, but that a certain percentage of housing be kept in the low-to-moderate income range. The best that can be said for such a position is that it shows an utter disregard for economic reality. Despite their earnest wishes, supply and demand still is the economic rule, and if something is made scarce, it becomes more valuable. Housing is no exception. The coalition must come to realize they cannot have it both ways.

The growth limit opponents were no more reasonable. To them, economics is the only rule, superseding all other considerations. Growth is good, therefore, unlimited growth is of unlimited value. Too many of those who gathered in the courthouse parking lot earlier this week, any restriction is too onerous. The remark by Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat to the hard hat gathering is illustrative of their feelings, "The beautiful environment is ugly to a man who can't support his family." That supposes that an ugly environment is our salvation. No one is prepared to accept that.

The supervisors probably did the right thing in adopting the growth rate they did, even though it is unlikely to satisfy anyone. It falls comfortably between the extremes demanded by the coalition and the development interests, and at least gives the planning people something to shoot at. It is a reasonable compromise.

But the planners won't be the only ones shooting at those figures. Both sides are dissatisfied with what they got and will be seeking ways to nullify them. The drama is not over.

For our part, we harbor the somewhat cynical view that, in the end, economics will win the day and that the county will expand at whatever rate it must to absorb the people who are on the way.

But by the same token, we hope there will always be those gadfly "environmentalists" around to make sure things don't get completely out of hand.