

Chico General Plan: City's land-use options break sacred ground

Alternatives A and B cross the Greenline, and Alternative C calls for heavy densities. Oh, boy ...

By [Evan Tuchinsky](#)

Chico's planning director and consultants updating the city's general plan are relative newcomers. They know the Greenline is more than a map line marked in green to keep urban growth from overtaking farmland—but do they know it's an emotional matter that strikes at the heart of land-use debates in Chico? Do they know it's seen by some as sacrosanct, and that any changes to it would require sign-off by the Butte County Board of Supervisors?

They know.

This reassurance is important, because two of the three concepts presented at the first Land Use/Growth Alternatives workshop Tuesday night (June 10) at California Park's Lakeside Pavilion involve significant leaps across the boundary.

Both Alternative A and Alternative B call for residential and industrial development of 1,114 acres in the Bell-Muir/Mud Creek area and mixed uses for 184 acres west of the railroad tracks in the Barber Yard/Diamond Match area.

Supervisor Jane Dolan long has been protective of those chunks of acreage she ensured fell outside the urban boundary. Chico Vice Mayor Ann Schwab expressed similar steadfastness Tuesday upon seeing the proposals for the first time.

“Encroaching on ag land beyond the Greenline isn't something I'd support,” she said, “and I don't think most people in the community would support that. Unless there's a vote of the community saying *go on to the other side of the Greenline*, I'm not going to support it.”

Alternative C also pushed a Chico hot button: density.

Unlike A (which calls for the largest addition of land) and B (moderate additional growth), C targets only three areas: the North Chico Specific Plan (477 acres), Barber Yard (156) and the Mendocino National Forest Specific Plan (148). Existing areas would require redevelopment at higher densities to accommodate a population surge estimated—based on a 40-year trend line—at 50,000 people between now and 2030.

Both Pam Johns of the consulting group PMC and Planning Director Steve Peterson emphasized that these

See for yourself
Maps for the three alternatives will be available starting today (June 12) at City Hall and on the general-plan site (www.chicogeneralplan.com). Residents have seven days to give feedback in advance of the next session, on June 25.

alternatives did not drill down on details or hard numbers. That was evident to Jason Bougie of the Building Industry Association. He accepted the 50,000 figure (2 percent growth per year) but didn't see that fitting realistically into Alternative C.

"I wish there was a little more definitiveness [in all the options]," Bougie said. "The biggest difference is between A and C—C is really going to create a constrained, traffic-congested city that also will have untraditional densities. High-rises and high density isn't why people move to Chico.

"The majority of people surveyed [by the city for the general plan] want a house with a yard. If we're going to build what the market desires, we're going to have to build at A."

Which brings us back to crossing the Greenline, which Bougie says is "almost a requirement in certain areas"—e.g., Bell-Muir and Mud Creek.

"As an association, we want to save the Greenline," he continued. "You do it by pushing it out to a defensible natural boundary [such as Mud Creek]. That solidifies, justifies and protects the Greenline for *another* 20 years."

Not everyone decries increasing Chico's density. Take Jon Luvaas, chairman of the city Planning Commission, who sees mixed-use neighborhoods as inevitable.

"My natural inclination is toward preserving open space for agricultural, watershed and viewshed conservation. My *expectation* is, over the next 20 years, we'll see fuel costs that make anything other than highly compact urban development almost impossible for anyone to afford.

"If we expect to be able to combat global warming, we need to constrain ourselves by not expecting we can use so many resources, and land. We'll need to find ways of changing our patterns of living.

"In reality, people will not have much choice but to make these changes," he continued, citing state law on emissions reductions also under consideration federally. "So it's important for the city to recognize these realities and plan for growth accordingly."

Just how much growth was a question posed by several of the 60 participants Tuesday night—Schwab among them. "I think we need to question the growth assumptions," she said. "Is 50,000 really what we need to plan for the way the economy is going and development being what it is?"

The planners took those concerns and the other suggestions from residents, and will continue to accept public comments for the next seven days. They'll refine the three alternatives and re-present them at the second workshop, slated for June 25.

After that, the City Council will decide how to proceed: take one plan, or mix and match. Johns, who's worked on a number of such plans, said "a hybrid solution happens 99 percent of the time."

Whichever way the council goes, this much is certain: "A lot of things are going to change in 20 years," Schwab said, "and we need to make sure we protect the core values of the community."