

# The great growth divide

## General plan hearings shows deep split on how Chico should grow

By [Robert Speer](#)

### Tuesday was a long day for Jane Dolan.

At 9 a.m. she was in Oroville, for a regular meeting of the Butte County Board of Supervisors, on which she has represented the Chico area for more than 28 years. That evening (Aug. 5) she attended a nearly five-hour joint Chico City Council and Planning Commission meeting on the city's 2030 general-plan update that lasted until after 11 p.m.

It was appropriate that she be there for a couple of reasons. One was that the meeting concerned proposed land-use alternatives, and the supervisors had just finished (on July 29 and 30) making their own land-use preferences known as part of their simultaneous general-plan updating process. A number of those decisions affect areas also under consideration by the city.

But her second reason for being there was personal as well as professional. That's because two of the three land-use alternatives under consideration for inclusion in the city's plan would significantly alter her most significant legacy as a supervisor, the 25-year-old Greenline protecting Westside orchard lands from urban development.

Both Alternative A, which proffers the most outward growth and would foster single-family homes on large lots, and Alternative B, which leans toward a mix of suburban single-family and mixed-use neighborhoods and high-density infill, would designate four areas currently outside the Greenline for future development.

Only Alternative C, the most restrictive and compact of the choices, leaves the Greenline untouched. According to data gathered by city staff and consultants, however, that alternative would not meet the housing needs of Chico without significant redevelopment of existing developed areas, with an emphasis on replacing less-dense development with high-density residential.

Addressing the council and commission, Dolan stated bluntly, "I do



### UP FOR GRABS

These two potential growth areas (Mud Creek and Bell-Muir) were a focal point of discussion at Tuesday's Chico general-plan hearing. Both are outside the Greenline, and while Supervisor Jane Dolan is willing to talk with the city about planning for Bell-Muir, she is adamant that the Mud Creek Special Planning Area remain orchard land. Some city officials would like to see both Bell-Muir and Mud Creek developed.

### All about preferences:

At Tuesday's hearing, home builders noted that a survey showed that 81 percent of Chicoans preferred to live in a single-family home with a yard, a fact they say Chico's general plan should acknowledge. Compact-growth advocates countered that, if asked, most people would say they'd prefer to own a Mercedes, but that doesn't mean they can afford one.

not support any of the alternatives that change the Greenline.” The line’s original goals, she reminded, “were to identify prime agricultural lands and protect them. That’s still valid.”

She did acknowledge, however, that the Board of Supervisors had agreed to consider the Bell-Muir Special Planning Area—a hodge-podge of ranchettes, houses and small orchards just north of West East Avenue but outside the Greenline—for low-density residential (one-acre minimums) and long has been willing to talk with the city about a more-urbanized plan for the area. Then she added: “But not if you include it as part of the Mud Creek area.”

She was referring to what is becoming one of the flash points in the debate over the new general plan. City officials have shown interest in both Bell-Muir and the orchard area just to the north, identified on plan maps as the Mud Creek Special Planning Area. Their argument is that moving the Greenline out to Mud Creek would add hundreds of developable acres adjacent to existing city development and provide a stronger, more natural boundary (the creek) for the line.

The area is also attractive because it has only two property owners, making it easy to plan for. Bell-Muir, in contrast, has dozens of property owners, many of whom disagree on what to do with the land. Planning-wise, it’s a challenge.

**The Greenline came up many times during the meeting**, and there’s considerable support for changing it in certain places, including Bell-Muir and Mud Creek. Former City Manager Tom Lando, for one, supported development out to Mud Creek, arguing that extending services to the Mud Creek SPA would “leverage” Bell-Muir and that the area already had a park and a school site (on Henshaw Avenue).

Jason Bougie, representing the Butte Community Builders Association, noted that the Greenline itself called for a policy review every five years, “but it’s never been done. ... Mud Creek and Bell-Muir are just so logical [for growth].” He added that landowners in the Mud Creek SPA want to build, and that the county has indicated a preference for allowing five-acre parcels in the area.

But just as many people contended that the city’s first guiding principle, sustainability, mandated protecting the Greenline. For example, Ernie Washington, a local attorney who also farms south of town, argued that the city needs to protect farmland and avoid the kind of sprawl he sees in other parts of the Central Valley.

Other speakers, including Planning Commission Chairman Jon Luvaas, noted that the state’s new emphasis on decreasing greenhouse-gas emissions and the city’s own commitment to the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement mandate compact development, the preservation of natural resources (such as farmland) and the minimization of sprawl.

**The debate over Bell-Muir and the Mud Creek SPA** typified the community’s profound division over how Chico should plan for the future.

On one side are those, including home builders, who say Chico is primarily a family town where people want to live in single-family homes with yards. Alternative C, they argue, will not give enough of them what they want and will only make them more likely to live in Orland or Oroville and commute to Chico, defeating the purpose of the sustainability guideline and AB 32.

The market knows best, they say. As Councilmember Larry Wahl put it, after listening to testimony for more than four hours, “I’m concerned that we have a roomful of bureaucrats, politicians and consultants telling the marketplace what to provide.”

On the other side are those like Elizabeth Devereaux, a local artist who co-chairs the Chico Sustainability Group, which has 60 members. In order to fulfill the mandate to reduce greenhouse gases, she said, “we need to stop the sprawl and get [people] out of their cars.”

Besides, she said, demographics are changing. There are fewer families with children and more retirees and single people in Chico these days, a trend that will continue.

Others agreed with her, arguing that Chico, like the rest of California and the nation, is at a critical juncture right now.

Barbara Vlamis, representing the Butte Environmental Council, mentioned a number of constraints on growth, including air quality, diminishing water supplies, the threat of fire, carbon emissions and declining local, state and federal budgets for infrastructure.

“We need a new model of dwelling types,” she said. “It’s time for the city to take the leadership” when it comes to greenhouse gases. Besides, if the city approves either Alternative A or B, she warned, it will have to acknowledge the carbon emissions in its environmental-impacts report and figure out how to mitigate them. “The best way to avoid that is to avoid the impacts,” she added pointedly.

**More than 25 Chicoans stepped to the podium** to offer thoughts on the general plan, and no two of them had exactly the same take.

Members of the General Plan Advisory Committee are “leaning toward” Alternative B, with a number of changes, its chairman, former Mayor Jim Owens, said during a break. And others, including Dolan, spoke of coming up with a “hybrid” that would pick and choose the best elements from all three alternatives.

Whether that’s practicable, or even possible, given the starkly differing approaches on view Tuesday, will soon be known.

All three of the alternatives will move forward for further review, including cost analyses, but one will be designated as “preferred” and receive special scrutiny, said Pam Johns, the project manager for consulting firm PMC.

The goal is to have the council decide on its preferred alternative by its Sept. 16 meeting. The Planning Commission will hold a hearing before then and make its recommendations to the council. The two-year general-plan-update process is half over, Johns said, and the ultimate goal is to have it done by August 2009.