

# Vision of Chico's future: more nature than structure

## Will the city support the Doe Mill/Honey Run project?

By [Robert Speer](#)

When I accepted local commercial real-estate broker Bill Brouhard's invitation to explore a large piece of grazing land east of the Chico Mall, I had no idea that my "tour" would involve spending nearly three hours on a bucking bronco of a four-wheeler, bouncing across a sea of volcanic rocks and desperately hanging onto handlebars that seemed to have their own ideas about which direction to take.

By the time we returned to the old barnyard where our journey began, I was exhausted. But I was also intrigued, in part because Brouhard had laid out a remarkable vision for development of the property and also because I had been exposed for the first time to one of the most stunning pieces of land in the Chico area. It's a gorgeous expanse of oak woodland valleys, gentle foothill slopes and swales, rock walls and shallow seasonal watercourses that seemed to go on forever.

Like most Chicoans, I hadn't even known it existed. Which is amazing, considering the property is so large—1,425 acres, more than two square miles—and yet so close to the urban edge that it is one of the most significant future growth areas under consideration as part of both the city's and Butte County's general-plan updates.

In fact, you can safely bet that when the city Planning Commission meets tonight (Thursday, Aug. 21) to analyze the general-plan land-use alternatives that have been presented so far, this big chunk of land immediately north of the Skyway and Honey Run Road will be front and center.

Like most of the potential growth areas in Chico, it's actually in the county. City officials refer to it as "the Schuster property," after its principal owner, Chico developer Steve Schuster. (Brouhard and his real-estate partner, Doug Guillon, both have "small interests.") But it's also labeled the "Doe Mill/Honey Run" study area on both city and county general-plan maps.

On July 30, the county Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 to designate the area for up to 1,500 new units through a specific plan—just what Brouhard and his partners wanted. Only Chico-area Supervisor Maureen Kirk voted no, but



### BACK IN TIME

This springtime photo of the 1,425-acre Schuster property shows the quality of much of the landscape on which local developers want to create a neighborhood with some 1,500 houses. Oak woodlands and rock walls like these will be preserved as open space. Courtesy Of Bill Brouhard

### Sustainability quotient:

The Doe Mill/Honey Run project will include green building techniques as well as a commitment to providing comprehensive planning that meets as many of its residents' needs as possible on site.

not because she didn't like their vision. Indeed, she believes it's "a gorgeous property and a beautiful plan," as she said during a recent phone interview. But the city, not the county, she said, should handle its development.

**You can fit a lot of houses on 1,425 acres**—many thousands, in fact. As a gauge, consider the recently approved Meriam Park development about a half-mile west of the Schuster property. It proposes to build as many as 2,300 dwelling units on just 220 acres.

But that land is flat and nearly treeless and contiguous to existing development, making it appropriate for higher-density development. Brouhard and his partners have an entirely different vision for their sprawling foothills property.

To begin, they turned the normal planning process on its head. Instead of deciding how many houses they wanted to build and then figuring out how to do it, they first examined the land. They wanted to know where the creeks and oak groves were, which areas would be good for hiking and horseback riding, where a community park might be located. "We asked, 'What does the land say?'" Brouhard explained.

Their idea was to develop a neighborhood based on recreation by offering easy access to hiking trails and bikeways; woodlands corridors; athletic fields; a wetlands preserve; picnic areas; perhaps a swim, tennis and fitness center; perhaps some equestrian facilities; perhaps a mountain-bike course. "It's about creating a lifestyle," Brouhard said.

In the end, they decided to leave fully 63 percent of the site—900 acres—in open space, including a 400-acre regional park and a 60- to 90-acre community park with picnic areas and athletic fields. The dominant features—the oak groves, the watercourses, the rock walls, the swales—will be preserved, and houses—some 1,500 units in all—will be clustered among them. Every effort will be made to minimize the number of fences and maintain the open feeling of the site, Brouhard said.

As we drove across the property—bounced is more like it—he would stop now and then to point out how houses could be clustered in relation to a grove of trees or a small meadow, or how a gentle slope could accommodate a chain of small ponds.

There are no actual plans yet, just a 40-page "vision book" that includes overlays of the property along with descriptions of what might be built. That includes a village core area near the southwestern corner of the property. The housing mix would radiate out from there, with higher-density multifamily units closer to the neighborhood core and single-family homes and custom lots farther out.



#### CLOSE IN

The Schuster property, shown here on the right, is only 1.2 miles from the Chico Mall. It's bordered by the Skyway and Honey Run Road on the south and connected to East 20th Street on the north. The green areas indicate land that will be set aside for parks and open space—900 acres altogether, including a community park in the western part of the

In addition, an elementary school will be sited adjacent to the community park.

Steve Visconti, the general manager of the Chico Area Recreation District, said the five members of his board of directors have visited the site and are "very excited" to be involved "from the infancy stage" in the development of a new park. "Steve [Schuster] and Bill [Brouhard] are the first developers to bring something of this nature to the district," he added.

"Growth is really starting to go in that direction," he continued, citing Meriam Park as an example. "There really is a need ... for more park facilities."

The question is: Will the city support such a large development on the edge of town?

**If the city Planning Commission determines** that some land must be made available for future growth, the Doe Mill/Honey Run property is a likely choice.

property.  
Courtesy Of Bill Brouhard

That's because it's the most viable eastside property. As Brouhard notes, it's close to existing development and has few vernal pools and no endangered Butte County meadowfoam, the environmental constraints that have kept other properties in the area from being developed.

In addition, westside properties listed as possible growth areas are mostly outside the Greenline, and the political will to crack the line doesn't yet exist.

But Brouhard is wary. The last big, creative project he backed—the 1,500-unit Bidwell Ranch in the mid-1990s—was a mixed-use development similar to this one in its dedication of open space (500 out of 750 acres) and creative use of the land, but it crashed into a wall of opposition to any development off Wildwood Avenue, at the entrance to Upper Park.

There's still strong opposition to eastside development from people who either oppose all outward growth or worry about loss of "viewshed" in the foothills.

Former longtime Planning Commissioner Kirk Monfort said he was "dead set" against the Doe Mill/Honey Run project until he went on a tour with Brouhard. "I thought much better of it after that," he said. "People ought to go out there and see it before they condemn it."

He sees several positive elements. For one, the property is closer to where most people work than other areas proposed for development, including the Mud Creek and Bell-Muir special planning areas in northwest Chico, both of which are outside the Greenline.

And the proposed 400-acre regional park, which would buffer the property on three sides, "might be what [Vice Mayor Ann] Schwab calls the 'gold line' " limiting further growth into the foothills.

His biggest concern, he said, is that the developers do what they say they are going to do, not just sell off sections of the property to other builders, as occurred in nearby Canyon Oaks.

Kirk shares that concern, but she loves the project. "The beauty of it is that they can do a specific plan that really meshes with the environment," she said.

Brouhard said that the developers are committed to a strong specific plan and development agreement.

It's a huge undertaking, obviously, but he's thrilled by it. "There's no other property in Chico like this one," he said. "It's a canvas with so much character already on it. Our job is to match the Chico lifestyle with the land."