

Editorial

NO ON MEASURE W: San Ramon voters should oppose changing the city's general plan and expanding growth boundaries

THE RESIDENTS of San Ramon have been clear: They want development contained within reasonable voter-approved growth boundaries.

But city leaders continue to ignore those wishes. In placing Measure W on the Nov. 2 ballot, the City Council proposes opening up to development about 3.5 square miles on the east and west sides of the city. That's an area about 19 percent the size of all the land within the current city limits. It's an area equal to half the entire city of Pleasant Hill.

It's ridiculous. And that's just one reason why voters should reject Measure W.

City leaders are trying to pawn this off as an attempt to carry out the will of the voters expressed by their approval in 2002 of the city's current general plan. That plan called for voter review of the city's growth boundaries in 2010. That could mean expanding or contracting the boundaries, or leaving them untouched. Measure W was certainly never what the voters intended.

The big development prize in this package is the Tassajara Valley. The land is east of the city limits and outside the city's voter-approved growth boundaries. The valley is currently under county control, which means that it can only be sparsely developed. Expanding the city's growth boundaries would lead to eventual full-scale development.

We don't know exactly what that development would be. Indeed, any proposals would have to go through normal city review. But we do know that key landowners in the valley have been itching to build. We know that city officials in San Ramon operate without the transparency of most other cities. And we know that, if Measure W passes, there would not be additional voter review required before development of the Tassajara Valley could move forward.

Similarly, on the west side of the city, Measure W would expand the city's growth boundary around the Norris Canyon area. We're generally unsympathetic to attempts to break the growth boundaries around Contra Costa. Voters in San Ramon and throughout Contra Costa have wisely recognized that we can't keep expanding, stretching out costly infrastructure while piling unnecessary mileage onto commutes. It's bad planning and it's bad environmental policy — especially when, in San Ramon's case, there is enough undeveloped land within the city limits to meet housing demand for decades to come.

Indeed, the city is trying to create more housing opportunities within the city limits. Measure W would also change the general plan designations to allow for "mixed use" development in a 295-acre region, known as the North Camino Ramon area, bordering the east side of Interstate 680 from the north end of Bishop Ranch to the northern city limits.

This proposal merits further consideration. But it first requires careful study and public review. The sketchy plans call for about 4.3 million square feet of new commercial space — that's about half the size of Bishop Ranch — and 1,500 new homes. The city hasn't even put out its draft proposal for the area, much less conducted an environmental review. Only after the plan has been carefully — and publicly — vetted should a general plan amendment be considered.

In sum, voters should reject Measure W for three reasons: The proposed expansions of the growth boundaries are horrible policy. The proposed general plan changes near the freeway are premature. And the two issues should have never been tied together in one ballot measure.

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