

Sierra Club's Tunnel Vision

by author's name

The Sierra Club has singled out states for praise and criticism for their handling of sprawling residential and commercial development and California received just mediocre ratings while Oregon, Vermont and Maryland were cited as exemplars of good planning and open space protection.

The report was another example of the Sierra Club's tunnel-visioned — and more than slightly hypocritical — attitude toward growth-related issues.

The club's current dogma says that states, cities and counties should be establishing urban development boundaries and forcing development to remain within them, while protecting open space lands beyond the lines. But in its state-by-state grading on land use controls, transportation and other subjects, the Sierra Club completely ignored the powerful underlying factor: population growth.

Praising such states as Oregon, Vermont and Maryland is akin to complimenting the sun for rising each morning. These states are experiencing relatively little population growth and therefore do not have the relentless demand for

housing, retail services and transportation facilities that high-growth states — such as California — must confront.

Oregon added about 400,000 people to its population between 1990 and 1998, says the Census Bureau, an average of 50,000 a year. Population growth in Vermont and Maryland is even scantier, according to the Census Bureau, about 3,000 a year in the former and about 40,000 a year in the latter. California's population, however, grows by 40,000 each month, driven by foreign immigration (300,000 a year) and a very high birthrate (500,000-plus babies per year).

The Sierra Club ignores those inconvenient facts, implying that development is unrelated to population growth and/or that population pressures on all states are equal and policy differences are purely political. At the same time, the Sierra Club has absolutely refused, despite intense internal debates, to even address the role of immigration in population growth. Why? Because talking about immigration's impacts would put the club in political conflict with Latino rights groups.

The hypocrisy doesn't stop there, however. While the Sierra Club promotes denser "infill" development of existing urban areas, it is endorsing ballot measures in Contra Costa and

Alameda counties that would effectively block denser housing in four already developed suburbs — Pleasanton, Livermore, Danville and San Ramon — which are close to mass transit. The measures, if enacted, would require any housing developments of more than token size to be approved by voters, not merely local officials.

Given the high demand for housing in the San Francisco Bay Area — resulting from underlying population growth and a vibrant regional economy — if those communities shut their doors, the only alternative would be to develop more farmland to the east.

"We're trying to create denser development, yet these initiatives will serve to push 30,000 people further out," says Bruce Kern of the Oakland-based Economic Development Alliance for Business. "That's not consistent with what environmentalists or public policy makers would like to achieve."

Affluent suburban communities don't want more high-density apartments and condominium units filled with less affluent, blue-collar workers, which is why the ballot measures are being promoted. The Sierra Club, whose members tend to be white, upper-middle class home-owners themselves, endorses the exclusionary, raise-the-drawbridge mentality implied in the "growth control" ballot measures — and then criticizes development

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| on the urban fringes.

| What's wrong with this picture? |