

Purpose of CEQA and what's occurring at SDC

COMMENTARY

By JOE LIEBER

The Sonoma Index-Tribune article on April 30 regarding the court ruling on the SDC proposal addressed many of the issues with many planning reports, especially regarding compliance with CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act).

The overall purpose of CEQA is to honestly identify a project's impacts and then to honestly mitigate (reduce impacts) to an insignificant level. Unfortunately, as we have seen in the case of the SDC proposal, this often is not done.

I have been involved as a specialist developing environmental impact assessments (Categorical Exemptions/Exclusions, Negative Exemptions/Exclusions, EIRs and so on). I have seen first-hand how authors try to make something insignificant with what I have coined as "planereze." What I mean by this is the use of vagaries, creating the impression of thoroughness with unenforceable language that sounds good. This often seems to be standard operating procedure with such documents I always fought back regarding such massaging of documents, but I was not in a decision-maker position so I was often overridden. These documents often have the appearance of honesty and transparency, but they often conceal the real impacts. What comes to mind is the public relations term of "spin." A definition of spin is: The act or practice of attempting to manipulate the way an event is interpreted by others.

It almost seems these documents are "work-arounds" of the CEQA process. Meaning that they are written to conceal real impacts just to get a project through CEQA.

Another problem with many of these documents is they often ignore or gloss over cumulative impacts (for you non-planners, these are impacts that can be created by multiple projects often nearby). The analogy of the frog gradually boiling in water comes to mind. Before you know it, you are "cooked" so to speak.

I believe most of us want the CEQA process to be honest, transparent and comprehensive. What has happened at the SDC has been none of these. About \$3 million, as I recall, has been spent on developing a document that has now been disputed by a judge. There is no credibility and this really is sad. It seems the essence of the report as William Shakespeare has said is, "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Thank you, Judge Bradford DeMeo, for rejecting the report. *Joe Lieber is landscape architect who lives in Sonoma*



The now-closed Sonoma Development Center property is the subject of controversial redevelopment proposals.

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