

Small town is big on environment

By Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2006

PORTOLA VALLEY- Last month, a few residents of Portola Valley's Ranch neighborhood had the idea to install solar panels on their homes together for a discounted rate.

They were hoping to interest five or 10 people in the project; 70 people came to a meeting on it.

Welcome to Portola Valley, where hundreds of residents drive Prius hybrids instead of SUVs and Town Council members are chosen for their green activist credentials.

In this town, reducing pollution and preserving open space have never been derided as hippie causes. Those values have long since become part of the mainstream discourse and are incorporated into the town's everyday functions -- from no-waste recycling to detailed green building guidelines for new homeowners.

Many of these initiatives go back decades and have set the bar for "green" achievements on a municipal scale across San Mateo County.

Portola Valley was one of the first towns on the Peninsula to sign up for recycling and trash removal services with GreenWaste Recovery of San Jose, thus ensuring that every single thing that residents throw out -- from kitchen waste to wine bottles -- is recycled.

After his election last December, the Mayor Steve Toben installed a "green procurement" policy to ensure that the town's employees made environmental choices in their daily work, from non-chemical janitorial supplies to the amount of paper being used.

Toben said that many residents had been pushing for changes.

"I think the town attracts people who have this inclination to support natural concerns. I saw that there was a momentum and I wanted to take some additional steps," he said.

Under Toben's leadership, the Town Council also decided to rebuild its Town Center complex -- encompassing a library, a City Hall, a town plaza and a community hall -- with the goal of achieving a stringent gold-standard "green" design to save energy. Part of the process will involve carefully dismantling and recycling nearly 100 percent of the wood, metal and concrete from the old complex and re-using them in the new one. The project is due to be completed in December 2008.

Town building policy now also gives specific attention to green design in the permit approval process, requiring homeowners to fill out a "sustainable building" checklist that ensures they will at least consider how the choices they're making will impact the environment.

None of the additions are mandatory, according to Toben. But now "at least the Architectural and Site Control Commission might ask a homeowner, 'Well, you're planning to install solar panels on your home. But have you considered bamboo flooring?'"

Portola Valley residents' passion for environmentalism runs deep. The town was incorporated in 1942 during a major controversy over a proposed 1,000 home subdivision on its western hillside; today, the site is forever protected as part of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's Windy Hill Open Space Preserve.

The residents of this deeply affluent town of 4,417 (median home price: \$1.5 million) even voted to impose a 2 percent annual utility tax on themselves in the early 1990s to benefit a fund earmarked for the purchase of open space.

Locals have taken action in other areas as well. Portola Valley Ranch neighborhood resident Ted Driscoll was among those who suggested that several neighbors get together and buy solar panels in bulk last month. Driscoll, who also happens to be a member of the Town Council, installed solar panels on his home in September and has taken the lead in organizing several meetings with SolarCity, the Foster City-

based company that has agreed to provide the panels at a 30 percent discount, provided enough people sign up.

"It was clear that there was interest in this. There was really the sensation that we were near the tipping point and really just needed an additional push," said Driscoll, who calls investing in solar panels "an ethical issue."

The Portola Valley initiative will be the first "bulk" solar deal ever attempted by SolarCity, said company CEO Lyndon Rive. The more people who convert their homes to solar, the more opportunity there is for savings on installation, labor, travel and permitting costs, he said.

"It's a green, forward-thinking community. If we can set the example in Portola Valley and show that it can be done, then we can promote this as a poster child and go to other communities," said Rive.

That's not all. In September, Portola Valley elected to join the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, a national agreement endorsed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2005 to reduce global warming pollution under the auspices of the Kyoto Protocol. In so doing, the town committed to reducing its carbon emissions at least 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

More than 20 local citizens have since created the Climate Protection Task Force to assess how to meet these goals, from adopting lifestyle and technology changes to educating fellow residents on how they can make a difference.

"I think the town has normalized the discourse (on environmentalism), created a space where we can have a reasoned discussion," said Toben. "We understand what the goals are, and we are discussing very seriously the effects of climate change."

Lincoln growth fears told

Loss of rural life is decried at hearing on plan for 2050 development.

By Jennifer K. Morita - Bee Staff Writer
Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Nov. 30, 2006

Hundreds of residents voiced concerns about overcrowded schools, traffic and the suburban march onto farmland and wildlife habitat during a hearing on Lincoln's proposed general plan, which envisions the city growing to 132,000 people.

Last week's joint meeting of the City Council and Planning Commission marked the first in a series of public hearings on the proposed 2050 general plan update, a planning document that will guide future growth.

The plan allows for the city to grow through the development of seven "villages," or self-contained communities, each with roughly 10,000 residents and schools, parks and a commercial center.

Councilman Primo Santini pointed out that under the proposed general plan, Lincoln will increase its population much more than it expands its physical boundaries.

"In essence, we're trying to do this in as an environmentally sensitive way as we can," Santini said.

In addition to small regional shopping areas with "big-box" national chain stores, the proposed general plan includes a "super regional retail center," such as an auto mall on Highway 65 west of the Lincoln Airport.

"Part of the city's vision is creating a community that is fiscally sustainable," Community Development Director Rod Campbell said.

Under the proposed general plan, Lincoln's borders would stretch north and west, more than doubling the size of the city from 19 square miles to 45. The plan also calls for preserving 40 percent of the land as natural open space.

Many residents, however, opposed what they called Lincoln's continued rapid growth.

Dori Childress said she and her family moved to the Lincoln area in 1989 because they wanted to live in a rural town. At the time, she was told Lincoln's population would peak at about 50,000.