

SGA Fact Sheet

The Major Issues With the Valley's Edge Proposal in Chico, California

Chico faces several overlapping crises — dependence on fossil fuels in the face of climate change causing larger and more destructive wildfires, a critical shortage of housing for poor and working people, irreparable loss of habitat and biodiversity, on top of a financial situation where the city of Chico is unable to maintain our basic public infrastructure.

All of these issues have a common cause - a reliance on urban sprawl that is unsustainable environmentally and economically. Since the end of WWII, Chico has built outward with a costly priority for automobiles. The largest buildings in the center of the city were demolished for parking lots and the streets were redesigned to accommodate high-speeds and volumes of automobile traffic. The rise of environmentalism in the latter part of the century led to some better development standards, like a network of bike paths, a public transit system, incentives for tree planting and penalties for their removal, and limitations on areas available for new urban sprawl.

The Chico General Plan adopted in 2011 designated five “special planning areas” for new growth “to meet the city’s housing and job needs.” At 1,448 acres, the Valley’s Edge site is larger than the other four combined.

Valley’s Edge is not in the valley, but the lower foothills between Stilson Canyon, where Little Chico Creek flows, and Honey Run Road, which runs along Butte Creek. As a “special planning area” a specific plan is required in order to proceed with annexation and approval of a development. The Valley’s Edge Specific Plan proposes 2,777 housing units, about half of which would be restricted to ages 55+, as well as 56.3 acres of commercial and office facilities, 40 acres of roadways, an elementary school, parks, and open space. A Homeowner’s Association (HOA) would cover the entire project and the majority of the parks, streets, and open space will be limited to members or those who pay to register with the HOA.

The project manager for Valley’s Edge in the past dealt with two projects in Chico which were shot down by citizen initiatives, so the developers are heavily engaged in public relations efforts keen on extolling the virtues of their proposal: how almost half the project area would remain designated open space, the majority of trees would not be cut down, and the project would include trails and bike paths. These are all requirements specified in Chico’s General Plan.

But Valley's Edge proposes to sacrifice a great deal of precious wildland and permanently restrict public access for a housing development that is fundamentally no different from past suburban sprawl in Chico but even larger in scale. Here are some of the main issues we've identified with the plan put forward:

➤ **Valley's Edge is not planned to meet the region's housing needs.**

- The 2020 Butte County Regional Housing Needs Plan identified the need for 3,488 housing units to be built in Chico from 2022-2030. 68.2%, or 2,378 of these housing units are needed for moderate, low, and very-low income households.
- Of the 765.2 acres planned to be built (as residences, commercial facilities, and roadways), only 9 acres, or 1.2% of the developed area, is set to be zoned for apartments.
- These would account for 6% of the total housing units in the project. These apartments would all be grouped in one section and would be the only portion of the project that could qualify for low-income housing subsidies.
- Meanwhile, 234.6 acres are proposed for very-low density housing -- one-half to two or more acre lots. These would support about 345 housing units. The nearby Meriam Park development, on 277 acres, was planned to include around 2,400 housing units plus parks, commercial facilities, offices, roadways, the Butte County Superior Court, and parking lots.

➤ **Valley's Edge would obstruct state and local climate goals.**

- Housing in Valley's Edge would cause exceptionally high greenhouse gas emissions primarily because of the excessive size of the houses and the built-in dependence on automobiles:
- Larger, detached houses are the least efficient style of homes to heat and cool. More materials are required for construction and maintenance. More pavement is required for access. More pipes are required for utilities. Delivery drivers, emergency responders, and all other services have greater distances to travel.
- This is not a compact development: Both the low-density of residences and the linear distribution of the housing along ridgelines are not supportive of even the

most minimal transit service. The spread of housing up ridges also erodes the transportation value of the bikeways, especially for aging populations.

- A traffic study conservatively estimated that Valley's Edge would generate 23,162 vehicle trips a day, with about 21 percent of the trips being within the project. This amounts to residents and employees driving 26.1 miles every day (from the southern to the northwestern ends of Chico is slightly over 8 miles).
- The sparse distribution of households would not create a sufficient market for basic needs like groceries and pharmacies to be provided by commercial zones on-site, obligating residents to travel further most likely by car.
- Transforming the landscape from grassland and woodland ecosystems to urban development would also emit significant greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce the ability of the landscape within the project site to sequester carbon.

➤ **Valley's Edge would expose its residents and the rest of the city to increased risk of wildfire.**

- "Sprawl development in California's blaze-prone wildlands increases ignition risk, puts more people in danger and harms ecosystems and wildlife."
- Blue oak and foothill pine woodland have a typical "fire regime of five to fifteen years"³. The Valley's Edge site burned in 1999, 2007, and 2018. Photo: Valley's Edge Property during the 2018 Camp Fire.
- About half of the housing units are restricted to seniors age 55+, including housing situated at the highest elevations and the greatest risk of wildfire on the project site. People over 60 are 20% more likely to die in fires than the national average. Those over 75 die in fires at twice the rate of the national average, and those over 80 are four times more likely to die.
- Building new large housing projects in fire hazard zones is unacceptable given the wildfire crisis that is hitting California year after year and is only getting increasingly worse from climate change.

➤ **Valley's Edge would cause irreparable loss of habitat and biodiversity.**

- Planet Earth is enduring a 6th mass extinction—coined a "biodiversity crisis" by scientists—being perpetuated by human activities. More than 90% of wetlands

(including vernal pools) have already been lost in California, largely due to agricultural and urbanization land use changes. ○ Valley's Edge would directly develop on top of about 1 acre of wetlands and would hydrologically interrupt many more wetlands by altering flow of water on the landscape upslope by converting much of the landscape into asphalt, concrete, and buildings

➤ Not the planet nor the City of Chico can afford more suburban sprawl. ➤ Instead, we need smart growth!

6I explained this hydrologic disruption in detail in public comments on the DEIR to the City of Chico submitted December 2021.

- Higher density infill and redevelopment - increasingly efficient use of land
- A range of housing options and publicly owned and maintained infrastructure enables people of all socioeconomic backgrounds to share the city.
- Integration of residential and commercial land uses so people can comfortably access their basic needs on foot.
- Walkability/bikeability enables cheaper, healthier, and more sustainable mobility options and a safer, more pleasant, and manageable transportation system.

Smart growth is how cities can actually meet housing needs and create a more sustainable city while conserving wildlands and preserving life on the planet.

References

<https://www.buttecounty.net/dds/planning/grants/SALC>

Center for Biological Diversity. "Built to Burn: California's Wildlands Developments Are Playing With Fire." February 2021.

"Valley's Edge Specific Plan DEIR"

FEMA. "Fire Risk for the Older Adult." December 1999.

Public comments on the DEIR to the City of Chico submitted December 2021.

Smart Growth Advocates, Butte Environmental Council, California Native Plant Society, Audubon Altacal, and the Blue Oak Chapter of the Sierra Club say NO to the Valley's Edge proposal.