**Prop. S helped save Escondido**

NIEL LYNCH – San Diego Union Tribune; August 26, 2007

One of the outstanding attributes of our government is a system of checks and balances that ensures fairness for all. The Escondido Growth Management and Neighborhood [Protection](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-prop-s-helped-save-escondido-2007aug26-story.html) Act, commonly referred to as "Proposition S," closed a loophole in that system of checks and balances at the city level.

Prior to its passage, the votes of three City Council members could determine the fate of the city. A majority of the voters felt that only needing three votes made it too easy for the council to pass unpopular land [development](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-prop-s-helped-save-escondido-2007aug26-story.html) schemes, often overriding the Planning Commission and staff recommendations in the process.

There was a popular perception that some council members paid more attention to large contributors, [real estate](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-prop-s-helped-save-escondido-2007aug26-story.html) speculators and land developers than they paid to the needs of average citizens who ended up paying for additional infrastructure and putting up with more pollution, overcrowded schools and increased traffic congestion, without deriving any compensatory benefits.

Cities have what is called a "general plan." This is a sort of overall blueprint as to how the city is to grow and develop, and it includes a comprehensive array of elements that are balanced to ensure a livable city at build-out. Broad categories of population density are established in different areas, which are then fine-tuned through specific zoning. These form the basis for determining that there will be sufficient water, sewer capacity, trash collection, other utilities, schools, commercial development, police and fire protection, recreational opportunities, parks and other amenities, and that there will be sufficient carrying capacity on the city's roads and so forth. Since it is done on an area-by-area basis, it ensures that each neighborhood will have the appropriate infrastructure in a timely fashion.

Here again, it only took three votes on the City Council to amend the general plan to accommodate higher densities. However, these density increases threw the rest of the plan out of balance. Increasing density in an area in which there were insufficient roads or schools or other aspects of infrastructure created a whole set of new problems, the cost and inconvenience of which were often borne by the average taxpayer because development frequently failed to pay its own way and the benefits to the existing residents were negligible.

After studying the problem for many years, a group of citizens formed to circulate an initiative that would require that any general plan amendments that increased residential density be submitted to the voters for final approval. This was seen as the most moderate way to add needed checks and balances. Someone who wanted to build a project in conformance with the existing zoning could do so quite easily. They could even petition the council for a reasonable modification of the zoning, as long as it did not exceed the overall general plan standards. It was only when a project required changing the general plan that a vote was triggered. Additionally, the proposition did not affect commercial or industrial property.

In the subsequent 10 years, it has worked quite well. It has encouraged developers to put in a better quality of project and to follow the general plan guidelines. A number of projects have been put to a public vote, and some have passed and some have been rejected. In one election a few years ago, there were several projects on the same ballot and they each received a different percentage of the vote, which proves that the voters gave each project individual consideration.

Escondido is nearly built out and this is the time to demand that only the best projects be built. This is also the last opportunity we will have to ensure that we have an optimum balance of amenities and infrastructure -- we simply cannot afford to throw the plan out of kilter to accommodate well-connected speculators, or our children will have to live with the consequences.

One hears a lot of blather about missed opportunities and increased tax base, but the reality is that Escondido gets around 50 percent of its income from sales taxes. Our best investment is stores that attract people from other cities who give us tax money but do not demand any city services in return. The immense sales tax revenue from Costco, for example, has greatly benefited the city of San Marcos for years.

Property tax, on the other hand, only generates approximately enough revenue to cover police protection. High-density projects contribute even less property tax per capita and actually end up costing the rest of us money. Developer fees recover only a portion of the costs of new development and do not cover any of the region wide costs such as major water projects or freeway improvements.

Other cities have watched our experience here in Escondido and have seen that this approach does work and is fair to all, so many have passed or are considering similar ordinances.

Unfortunately, some of our council members still believe the long-discredited notion that population growth is necessary for economic growth, and they believe this with such fervor that they are immune to all the studies and statistics that show otherwise.

A generation ago, local merchants thought that more people meant more customers. What they forgot was that growth attracted more competitors as well. Most of these merchants are gone now and our once-thriving Grand Avenue is only a pale ghost of its former self.

In those days, taxes were raised regularly to cover the hidden costs of growth, and this steady increase in property taxes forced many people out of their homes, until the voters rebelled and passed Proposition 13.

Prop. S was just another response to this situation, as well as a manifestation of the public's deep underlying mistrust of many elected officials. By creating this additional check on the possible misuse of governmental power to benefit private speculators, the public now has more confidence in its elected officials, which is ultimately a benefit to all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Escondido resident Niel Lynch is treasurer of Escondido Chamber of Citizens, the local environmental nonprofit group that circulated the petitions for Prop. S in 1998. He has lived in Escondido for 54 years and "watched E'dido grow from a population of around 7,000 to its current size," which is about 141,000, according to San Diego Association of Governments estimates.

**TEXT OF PROPOSITION S**

The People of the City of Escondido do ordain as follows: Proposition S

**SECTION 1. AMENDMENT OF THE GENERAL PLAN.** A. The following shall be added to the General Plan as GP Amendment Policy E 2.3:

**Policy E 2.3.** Permitted land uses in the residential areas of the City shall be intensified only when the voters approve such changes. No General Plan Amendment or new Specific Planning Area shall be adopted which would:

1) increase the residential density permitted by law,

2) change, alter, or increase the General Plan Residential Land Use categories, or

3) change any residential to commercial or industrial designation on any property

designated as: Rural; Estate; Suburban or Urban

unless and until such action is approved and adopted by the voters of the City at a special or general election, or approved first by the City Council and then adopted by the voters in such election.