

Town politics clash online

Web site by advocacy group spawns rival

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VALLEY SPRINGS -- A provocative pig with lipstick is leading the charge as this town's political debates and civic life leap online in dueling Web sites.

The pig appears on MyValleySprings.com, a site operated since November by a group of six women who organized this past fall to fight what they see as poor land-planning decisions that threaten the area's beauty and safety.

Group members say they aren't anti-development but are alarmed at the bulldozing of oaks, a proposal to increase the production of a rock quarry below New Hogan Dam by 500 percent, and perhaps most of all, a plan to build 1,100 homes between New Hogan Reservoir and Valley Springs.

"I don't like things being decided behind closed doors," member Colleen Platt said. "I just got tired of hearing people say, 'There's nothing you can do.'"

Group members have been busy posting meeting notices, photographs and editorials on the Web site. Recent items include a photograph of silt tracked by quarry trucks onto a bridge over the Calaveras River and a photograph of a sign announcing a future shopping center along Highway 26 near Hogan Dam Road.

The site's harshest criticism -- represented by the pig with lipstick -- is reserved for the Spring Valley project that CRV Enterprises Inc. wants to build on the former Ponte Ranch, north of New Hogan Reservoir close to town.

Developers say the proposed project defines smart growth: swaths of open space preserved by concentrating houses more densely, using existing water and roads, and including pedestrian trails and plenty of park space.

But MyValleySprings advocates say that is just putting lipstick on a pig. Viewers who click on the pig get an illustration of part of the proposed housing tract.

That doesn't sit well with some of those working to design and build the proposed housing, parks and shopping centers.

"It is offensive to my own family," said Dave Tanner, a golf course designer and land planner who is consulting on the Spring Valley project as well as the separate shopping center planned at Highway 26 and Hogan Dam Road.

"My two kids see things like that and hear things," he said. "That is wrong. We shouldn't do name calling and mud flinging."

Mike Dell'Orto of Mokelumne Water and Mining Co. is the consultant hired to serve as project manager for the Spring Valley/Ponte Ranch development. He viewed the MyValleySprings.com site and appreciated parts of it -- especially the smart-growth principals, and links to state and federal Web sites.

"But then when I looked beyond it, there is some sarcastic type stuff, and some a little bit mean and nasty," he said.

The sarcastic edge to some parts of MyValleySprings.com has led to a rival site, OurValleySprings.com, that came online last week, said Phil Weaver, owner of the Shou Shu Kung Fu martial-arts school in Valley Springs.

"It seemed a little on the propaganda side to me," Weaver said of MyValleySprings.com. "So I decided to get mine finished."

He said his Web site will have information on public meetings and land-use issues but also on a variety of other community happenings ranging from the Friends of the Library to PTAs to meetings of business groups.

"There's an opportunity for people to post comments about the information," Weaver said. "We may get some sarcasm there, but it is not coming from the editor of the site."

Bill Claudino, the Calaveras County supervisor who represents Valley Springs, said he has met with MyValleySprings.com organizers and hopes they will spark wider political involvement, although he shied away from endorsing the group's rhetoric.

"There are a lot of fears out there," Claudino said. "People are afraid we're going to end up with a mess down there."

"One of the ways to avoid it is for people to ask the tough questions like they are doing."

One step, coming within a few months, likely will be one or more community meetings to begin the discussion. For group member Lori Whitney, those talks begin with the rolling hills and oak woodlands she sees when she rides on horseback around reservoirs including New Hogan just south of Valley Springs.

"Everywhere I ride, it takes your breath away. I don't want to lose that," Whitney said.

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