

Sierra Club Lake Group position paper on the Cristallago Project

The Lake Group has been actively participating in the debate about this project (which would put 650 residential units, 325 “resort” units, and an 18-hole golf course on a 860 parcel outside the North Lakeport Community Growth Boundaries) since 2005. At that time the Community Development Department recommended that the application be rejected immediately, because of gross inconsistencies with the General Plan and Lakeport Area Plan. We supported that recommendation, which unfortunately did not prevail with the Board of Supervisors.

Subsequently an Environmental Impact Report was prepared, but this document failed to acknowledge many important impacts and moreover incorporated a crippling structural flaw by confusing a “programmatic” and “project” level EIR. When the Planning Commission certified the EIR we appealed that decision to the BOS, detailing the reasons why it provided an inadequate basis for making a decision on whether to approve the project. Unfortunately our appeal was rejected by the BOS.

Cristallago’s environmental impacts are severe. To mention just a sampling, it will disturb a half million cubic yards of soil, much of it asbestos-laden serpentine. Nearly a hundred acres of oak woodlands will be demolished. Adverse impacts on air quality are likely to force the county out of compliance with state and federal standards. The potential loss of rare plants and undiscovered archeological sites is impossible to estimate. The intense darkness of the night skies and equally intense silence of this rural area will be gone forever. Increased traffic will burden the neighborhood, and add to the load in downtown Lakeport and elsewhere in a manner that has not been analyzed. 600 acre-feet of Clear Lake water will be used to irrigate a golf course. Possible sedimentation impacts on Scotts Creek, Lyons Creek, and Clear Lake itself have not yet been fully investigated. Furthermore, Cristallago is a classic exemplar of sprawl: rather than accommodating population growth through infill, it will result in leapfrog development into undeveloped countryside adjacent to ongoing agricultural operations.

Despite its inadequacies, the Cristallago EIR identified several significant and unavoidable impacts, and thus project approvals required “findings of overriding considerations” by the Board of Supervisors. These findings were entirely based on Cristallago’s supposed economic benefits, but those benefits are extremely implausible in an era when potential investors are demonstrating a strong inclination to keep their checkbooks in their pockets, and the game of golf is declining nationwide, with many clubs closing and the resorts and residential developments tied to them falling into default and bankruptcy. To make matters worse, the dedicated marina facilities on which the economic evaluation of Cristallago’s resort component was based were withdrawn subsequent to foreclosure of the property. Given the shaky financial condition of the developers and the unimaginative, financially implausible characteristics of the project, rather than becoming an economic engine for Lake County, Cristallago will most probably become one of our many paper subdivisions.

Worst of all, the project is plainly not compliant with our General Plan, as was demonstrated in a Sierra Club letter detailing dozens of inconsistencies. By approving it anyway, the Board of Supervisors set a precedent that will cripple our ability to guide future growth, disregarded the expressed wishes of the citizens of Lake County, and violated state Planning and Zoning law. The Sierra Club is determined to protect the General Plan and the Community Growth Boundaries which are our primary defense against the sprawl that has defaced so much of the rest of California, and has therefore instigated legal action against the county and developers.