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Vote to settle debate over urban limit

Board of Supervisors agrees to put growth boundary issue on ballot as cities, county cannot agree on contentious plan

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Contra Costa voters will get a chance to vote on a countywide urban growth boundary in November thanks to a long-awaited decision by the Board of Supervisors Tuesday.

The board voted unanimously to approve the ballot measure language and environmental work for the proposed urban limit line, which has been nearly two years in the making.

In a process noted for its long debates and sometimes cantankerous exchanges, this final vote was remarkable for its absence of comment.

"The good news is we have an urban limit line to place on the ballot, and it's been a long process," said John Gioia, the board chairman, when asked for comment after the meeting.

"The board has been consistent through the whole process; it wants to hold the line and, at the same time, respect the will of the voters in Antioch and Pittsburg."

The county and all of Contra Costa's cities need to have a growth boundary in place by 2009 because of a provision of Measure J, a half-cent sales tax county voters approved in 2004.

Measure J requires the cities and the county to abide by a "mutually agreed upon, voter approved" growth boundary, beyond which no large-scale development will be allowed. In exchange, they will receive a share from a \$360 million street maintenance fund and a \$100 million pot of money for alternative transportation projects.

Before and again after Measure J was passed, the county, cities, environmental and business groups sent representatives to large public meetings to hammer out a proposal that everybody could live with. The idea was to place a countywide line before voters that the cities would adopt as their own.

But the cities and the county could not agree on a compromise plan, largely because of disagreements between the county and Pittsburg, Antioch and Brentwood. Those cities wanted a growth boundary that would allow them room to build more houses while the county insisted on a more restrictive line.

The three cities individually placed urban limit lines before their own voters last November. Brentwood's measure failed at the polls but voters approved the new, more expansive lines in Antioch and Pittsburg.

Bowing to the will of the voters in East County, the growth boundary proposal that the supervisors approved for the November ballot was drawn to match the lines in Pittsburg, Antioch and San Ramon. San Ramon voters approved an urban limit line before Measure J passed in 2004.

Last week, however, after hearing from environmentalists who are contemplating attacks on the Antioch and Pittsburg growth boundaries, the supervisors added a sentence to the measure's introduction: "The Board of Supervisors' recognition of the Antioch, Pittsburg and San Ramon voter-approved Urban Limit Lines in the proposed ballot measure should not be construed as an endorsement or support by the Board for the eventual development of urban uses in these locations."

If voters approve the countywide line Nov. 7, the 17 cities still without a voter-approved urban limit line will then be able to adopt the county's line to comply with Measure J.

In addition to creating an urban limit line that will expire in 2026, the ballot measure is designed to preserve 65 percent of the county as open space and protect prime agricultural land.

The proposal requires countywide voter approval and a four-fifths vote of the Board of Supervisors to expand the line by more than 30 acres. It also requires periodic reviews of the line, including an evaluation of whether the growth restriction allows the county to expand sufficiently to meet its jobs and housing goals.