

# Petaluma's Experiment in Growth Management

Warren Salmons



## *How a California city has managed its growth from 1970 to the present.*

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Petaluma, California's growth management program is in its teenage years. And teenagers can be really hard to deal with. They struggle with subtle yet profound internal changes, and discover that the simplistic responses that carried them through childhood will not meet the complex and ever-changing demands of adult life. Petaluma's growth management system is on the verge of such a change, but its direction is as yet unknown.

### Controls First Considered

**The Reasons.** Four major influences were at work in Petaluma when the com-

munity was forced to consider the institution of a growth management system:

- **Location.** The city stood in the path of rapid suburban growth pushing outward from San Francisco. The freeway (U.S. 101) provided fairly short commuting times to jobs in San Francisco and Marin County. The city lay in an attractive rural valley, adjacent to large tracts of flat, easily buildable, agricultural land across the freeway.
- **Services.** The city offered a full complement of public and commercial services. But by the time the growth pressures of the late 1960s and early 1970s were abruptly slowed by a one-year moratorium, the city's sewage treatment plant would only have had one year's additional growth capacity;

the water supply was stretched, while awaiting the completion of a two-county water project; and, to the distress of parents, elementary schools in the newer parts of the city were on double sessions.

- **Growth.** In spite of already overtaxed services, the city's general plan, in place since 1962, clearly anticipated and encouraged continued wide-scale residential growth. From 1968 to 1972, locational and economic circumstances brought an average of 2,000 new residents per year to a community that claimed a population of only 15,000 in 1960.
- **Preservation of quality of life.** Apologies to those who mistrust, as trite, attempts by a community to preserve its "small-town feeling." But the efforts to maintain quality of life and small-town feeling were important determinants in Petaluma's decision to institute a radical new planning tool — growth management — in 1972.

It is worth a moment here to establish the character of the community. John Hart wrote, in an article for *Cry California*, at the time the community was struggling in court to legitimize its growth management system, that Petaluma was for 100 years a rural market town, a place of business for the ranches of southern Sonoma and northwestern Marin Counties. The local wealth was largely in cattle and poultry.

Set in the large, flat drainage basin of the San Francisco Bay, surrounding a slough called the Petaluma River, the town was for decades a busy secondary port. Petaluma has never been a picture-postcard town. But with its Victorian houses, its tall silver grain elevators, even its long-unused river landings, it has a character that is distinct, valuable, and vulnerable.

**The City's Evolution before Controls.** Petaluma today shows the evidence of two different eras of development. Generally, for instance, the west side represents the era before growth management. The freeway snakes through the section lying west of the center of town, as does the river. Housing ranges from the simple to the elaborate. And the older parks and tree-lined streets radiate west from the center. Clearly, the west side could be said to have developed organically.



1985 westside radial street pattern and eastside grid pattern.

Today, the town as a whole passes for "old" by California standards. It had already become well established, and grown to about 10,000 in population, within its first 100 years. It grew compactly. It spread from just beyond the river to the feet of the nearby western hills — a town tied to the land and to the people who worked the land.

The residents, especially the new residents who came just before growth management started, and who live in the single-family tracts that cropped up in the fields flanking the freeway, understood the type of "aw, shucks" values that the community represented. In addition, they obviously understood the priorities of a tolerable commuting time and of affordable housing. Both old and new residents clearly understood that growth was fast outstripping the city's capacity to provide services, and was moving faster than the value systems of the community — either those of the old or the new contingent — could accept.



*Petaluma River turning basin adjacent to downtown area.*

#### **Controls Initiated: Earliest Efforts**

In 1969 and 1970, the community began to wake up to and be alarmed by the magnitude of recent growth. Conferences and discussions went on between builders, community residents, professional staff members, and decision makers. But these meetings failed to produce an alternative course. In 1971, there was a moratorium, intended to give the community time to plan for action. Then, in 1972, the five-year environmental design plan, which was really a short-term general plan, was adopted. It called for a cap of 500 new housing units per year, which represented the average annual growth during the immediately preceding years.

Later in 1972, the city adopted, by resolution, what has since been named the

residential development control system. Among its features were the 500-unit-per-year limit, applicable to any project in excess of four units; and a 17-member evaluation board, whose members were chosen at large from the community by the city council.

The 1972 control system incorporated a once-a-year competitive evaluation of projects, quotas for housing types and geographic distribution, and evaluation criteria. The criteria included consistency with the environmental design plan, availability of services, urban design features, and provision of needed public facilities.

In 1973, the city of Petaluma was sued. The issue was the annual cap on new dwelling units. The Supreme Court settled the matter in 1976, when it refused to review the appellate court decision, and let stand the "Petaluma Plan" and the residential development control system. In the following year, when the city had been operating the original management system for five years, it decided the time had come to reevaluate its efforts.

#### **The Ordinance**

In 1977, a second environmental design plan, or short-range general plan, was adopted that ran largely along the lines of the first (1972) plan. The 1977 plan's adoption led to a revised residential development control system, adopted not by resolution but as an ordinance. This was an important change: an ordinance is much less flexible and much less easy to administer.

The ordinance called for an annual maximum of 5 percent population growth, which, at the time, in 1978, equalled about 500 new units per year. Because of increased population growth in the intervening years, the cap is now around 700 units per year. Since 1977, housing production has rarely approached the 5 percent limit.

Other features of the 1977 system included exemptions: for housing for low-income persons, the elderly, and the handicapped; for developments with fewer than 10 units; and for infill projects under five acres. The ordinance also introduced the new concept of reservations for future-year allocations. This feature applied particularly to larger projects of more than 100 units. This

move was indicative of a changed development community, in which fewer developers chose to work in Petaluma, but those who did, tended to undertake larger projects.

Mandatory environmental review, which had come into being in California in 1973, now formed part of the process and had to be completed after evaluation by the review board, yet, of course, before the onset of construction. This new environmental review could and did lead to problems. Projects passed



*Typical new residential arterial design in new eastside neighborhood.*

board review, only to be found later to have serious environmental problems.

#### **Other Recent Measures**

Also in about 1978, the city land division and zoning regulations were modified, in order to require that projects evaluated under the management system would have to have their building permit allotments granted by the city council before its tentative (land division) map could be filed. Sites had to be rezoned as planned unit developments (PUDs). And in some cases, this was an unnecessary procedure.

In 1981, additional revisions were made to the evaluation criteria of the residential development control system, to focus more heavily on design features. Also, the composition of the evaluation board was modified, to include only the appointed planning commission and the city's architectural review committee. This gave the appointed commissioners an advantage when they later had to rule officially on the projects. Exemption from review now applies to projects having fewer than 15 units, rather than the earlier 10 units. Projects are rated all year long, instead of only once a year, on a competitive basis, and environmental review has to occur *before* project evaluation.

The process today is: environmental review; technical evaluation under this revised residential development control system; PUD rezoning for all residential projects subject to the management system; planning commission and city council review for all land division projects; and architectural committee review for all projects. This process takes between six and 18 months and still does not award to applicants their building permits.

### Looking Back

**Disadvantages.** What lessons has Petaluma learned? Some of the drawbacks might easily be listed first. The system is simplistic, given the complexity of the greater system by which housing is produced. It has proved cumbersome and much less effective in the current housing market, dominated as this market is by cautious investment rather than by rampant speculation. The process adds time and, therefore, cost to housing production — especially when developers ask to revise a project to meet changing market demands.

The system has tended to reduce the number of developers willing to partici-



*Typical downtown commercial buildings.*

pate in the city's market and, thereby, the variety of housing in the market. Nor has the program resulted in geographic balance or balance of housing opportunities.

**Advantages.** The system has not been all bad. Benefits have included reductions in leapfrog development. A fairly compact growth pattern has resulted — one that is economical to service. And the system has helped moderate growth over the years. The city has had, over the past 10 years, an average rate of about 2.5 percent average annual growth.

The system gives early opportunities for staff and decision makers to review projects. We can review projects earlier and react earlier, before details are locked in. To builders, the system offers the chance to understand the community's development criteria, as they are spelled out in advance.

The program did promote an image that the community is willing to go to great lengths to preserve its character and livability. This is a significant benefit from this kind of system.

Also, the program has allowed the city to promote certain types of housing by offering exemptions from the system. When, for instance, developers were building only single-family houses, multi-family units were exempted, and developers responded by proposing condominium projects. When apartments were needed, apartments were exempted.

One last positive benefit: the program bought the city some time during which its policy planning, municipal management, and decision-making functions could become more sophisticated in response to growth pressures.

**Litigation.** Of considerable interest is the real impact of the system, with respect to the alleged or expected impacts suggested during the protracted litigation of the 1970s.

One allegation was that the community was violating the U.S. Constitution by limiting the "right to travel," with "right to travel" measured in terms of housing demand. If a city provided any fewer units than were actually demanded, it was limiting the public's right to travel. In spite of Petaluma's 500-unit limit, and its later 5 percent limit, its average population growth has actually been about 2 percent, and its housing unit production has remained around 2.5 percent. There has not been the demand for as many units as are now available through the system.

Second, it was charged that the city's management system would upset the regional housing market. This did not happen. Petaluma's 1978 environmental design plan anticipated a population of some 55,000 by 1985. In fact, the current population is about 37,000. Since 1970, Petaluma has grown about 4 percent faster than its closest neighbor to the south, that is, nearer San Francisco.

### Looking Forward

In 1985, Petaluma began updating its 1962 general plan. The city's second short-range environmental design plan expired in 1985. Civic leaders are rethinking the whole program. The development control system, in its present form, has probably reached the end of its useful life. It will be restructured. The concept will remain, but with a new focus — not on quantity, but on quality. (IRWA)

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