

Measure U wrong way to prevent development

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Measure U is an extreme precedent-setting solution in search of an unrealized problem.

The initiative, driven by neighborhood group Save Rural Angwin, to redesignate land owned by Pacific Union College from residential to agricultural aims to insulate Angwin from commercial development at the expense of the college's property rights and of the public's trust in local government.

Wresting control of the college's land assumes the worst of the institution's intentions — new dense housing and multi-use development. The neighborhood group's fear is that new development in Angwin will increase the population and commercial traffic, uprooting its bucolic charm in the name of college and developer profit.

Pacific Union College denies having such “city-building” plans. Yet it is the institution's secretive approach to the sale of some of its parcels that spurred such drastic ballot action from its neighbors.

At this moment, there's no project being proposed for any of the parcels in question.

If or when a project is presented, it will have to go before the Napa County Planning Commission and ultimately the Board of Supervisors. It is the representative government process we've known and trusted throughout Napa County's history.

Save Rural Angwin's fear of more housing units on PUC property is legitimate. The college may well, at the very least, want to build dormitory units to house a growing student body and faculty.

But to build anything that is not directly college-related, Pacific Union or a developer must seek the approval of county leadership through a traditional project-planning process that includes county staff recommendations, environmental reviews, Planning Commission hearings and a date before the Board of Supervisors.

Measure U would eliminate the right to that process.

No one thinks large-scale development is a good fit for Angwin. Beautifully rural or not, it lacks the infrastructure to properly support even the population currently residing there. It would cost

county taxpayers millions to adequately fund additional law enforcement and fire services, and Howell Mountain Road would need a complete overhaul were it to support significantly more traffic.

But large-scale development isn't what voters are addressing through Measure U. The issue is a zoning change that would strip the college of its property rights.

Measure U is the result of an evaporation of trust between Angwin neighbors.

Pacific Union College and Save Rural Angwin need to sit down again at the same table and work toward a common good for that community.

Neither side is without fault. PUC needs to be more open about its plans to sell part of its land and how it intends to use the resulting profits. Save Rural Angwin needs to step back from its autocratic solution and try to re-establish a productive dialogue with the college.

Why should voters from American Canyon to Calistoga decide an Angwin neighborhood dispute? Remote as Angwin is, it is reasonable to assume many of those voters deciding this issue have never even been there.

To rule by majority vote through an electorate not fully informed or invested in an issue will yield a poor result and lay the groundwork for misjudgment.

An issue such as this is why we established the representative government this measure so brazenly seeks to supersede.

Dense housing or any large-scale commercial development in Angwin is a bad idea, but Measure U is the wrong way to prevent it.