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**SUSIE VAN KIRK  
HISTORIC RESOURCES CONSULTANT  
P.O. BOX 568  
BAYSIDE, CA 95524  
707-822-6066  
svkirk@humboldt1.com**

RECEIVED

July 22, 2007

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Tom Hofweber, Supervising Planner, Humboldt County  
Humboldt County Planning Commission

HUMBOLDT COUNTY  
PLANNING DIVISION

Re: Cultural and Scenic Resources Chapter, General Plan Update

Dear Mr. Hofweber and Members of the Commission:

Over the past thirty or so years, professionals working in the field of cultural resource management have attempted on numerous occasions to establish adequate County planning measures to ensure the protection of such resources, including prehistoric, ethnographic, and historic properties. With the General Plan currently under review and update, there is now an opportunity to make these past efforts a reality, but, unfortunately, the proposed Chapter 15 needs significant strengthening if it is to become a meaningful document for protecting Humboldt County's heritage.

There are a number of inadequacies that Janet Eidsness, who heads a professional group (HHPN), has documented in her white paper, discussions with County staff, and her July 20, 2007 comments. I would encourage staff and commissioners to take her comments very seriously for two reasons. First, she and her colleagues are professionals who work on a daily basis with cultural resources and the federal and states laws that affect them. Secondly, they have the knowledge and expertise that planning staff and commissioners lack because they have simply not had experience with culture resource management. Therefore, it is crucial that staff and commissioners look to those with that knowledge and make the needed changes that will result in a strong cultural resources protection chapter in the General Plan.

There are two concerns which I would like to stress, having worked professionally as a consultant for more than thirty years in northern California, mainly in Humboldt County.

1. It is extremely important that the County fully incorporates into its planning the state and federal laws that pertain to the protection of cultural resources and the process of consultation and public involvement. The County's present slipshod approach to protecting cultural properties is dismal and the law, both at the state and federal levels, demands adherence to a number of statutes that have been enacted to protect cultural properties.

I am particularly concerned about the CEQA process that triggers the preparation of cultural resources reports for discretionary projects. A process that relies on planning staff to determine whether cultural resources could be impacted by a project is fraught with problems.

First, only a fraction of the cultural properties in Humboldt County have been identified by survey. Secondly, current planning staff lacks the knowledge needed to determine if there are potential resources on a project site or its surrounding area. It is only through research, documentation, and evaluation against CEQA and Section 106 criteria that the cultural significance of a property can be determined. When there is no staff with historic resources and CEQA expertise, there is no expertise at the counter for making a determination of whether cultural properties might be present and could be affected by a proposed project.

I can't emphasize enough how important this issue is in implementing policies for protecting the county's heritage. There has to be a better way of triggering cultural resources reports than to rely on untrained personnel to make the call. The County should hire planning personnel who know state and federal cultural protection statutes and would implement the applicable laws when a discretionary project is submitted. An initial step in the review of that project would be an on-the-ground look by a cultural resources professional or knowledgeable staff, along with tribal consultation, to determine if there are any resources present that need to be researched, documented and evaluated. Without such safeguards, cultural resources will continue to be negatively impacted or destroyed by projects approved by the County.

2. The County has no appropriate process for protecting the public records that are absolutely necessary for protecting cultural resources. CEQA requires the "whole record," yet it is sometimes very difficult to locate or use that record for documenting properties. We have a deplorable situation in the County. Important materials have been lost or worse, destroyed; they are scattered all over in various County offices; there is no catalog of public records; in some cases, documents—invaluable documents—are in fragile condition and poorly maintained; access by professional researchers is sometimes intentionally restricted or restricted simply because nobody knows what exists; and there is a general disregard for the value of these records by those who have responsibility for their protection. We desperately need a central archive for County records, an archive staffed by professionals and in a building that affords climate control and provides for appropriate archival techniques. To allow these irreplaceable and vitally-important records to simply fade away because the responsible authorities ignore them is unforgivable.

Thank you for consideration of these comments.

Sincerely yours,

  
Susie Van Kirk