



**COUNTY OF LAKE  
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

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February 9, 2021

The Honorable Senator Henry Stern  
State Capitol, Room 5080  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Senate Bill 55 (Stern) – OPPOSE As Introduced December 7, 2020**

Dear Senator Stern:

On behalf of the County of Lake, we wish to submit our strong opposition to your Senate Bill 55. As presently written, SB 55 would prohibit all retail, commercial, industrial and/or residential development in Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) and State Responsibility Areas (SRA), as determined by the Director and State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Since 2015, destructive wildfires have consumed greater than 60% of Lake County's total landmass, leading to large scale evacuations, significant loss of property, and even loss of life. Local residents and our Board are more aware than many of the need to responsibly and sustainably develop housing and commercial spaces in California, and do so in earnest consideration of fire and other risks associated with areas proposed for development.

As is readily apparent from the map viewable at <https://egis.fire.ca.gov/FHSZ/>, however, a sizable share of the potentially developable land in unincorporated Lake County is located in SRAs. Such a blanket prohibition of development would significantly frustrate efforts to stimulate our local economy. Lake County is already among the most impoverished counties in California, and further restrictions of development would exacerbate our longstanding struggles.

We are not alone. 56 California Counties have SRA lands within their borders, and fire risk in these areas is widely variable, from moderate to very high. Using the SRA designation, alone, to prohibit development is an unacceptably blunt instrument.

Some of the most promising projects under consideration in Lake County wouldn't even be possible, were SB 55 current law. July 21, 2020, our Board approved the Guenoc Valley Mixed Use Planned Development Project, an innovative commercial resort set on 16,000 acres of privately-owned SRA land. This development can be truly game changing for Lake County.

What if SB 55 were law today? Instead of the genuine and realistic excitement that is mounting in South County, Lake County would be facing yet another public policy-driven setback.

Passage of SB 55 would very probably, in the long view, invite a shift toward even greater population density and concentration of industrial activity in California's urban centers, areas that faced unique and profound challenges as a result of COVID-19 Pandemic. Should this shift occur, rural jurisdictions seeking to fulfill essential functions and deliver critical human services, many of which are funded by Property and Sales Tax revenues, would face deepening challenges.

It must also be borne in mind that many rural Californians have deep and abiding ties to the communities in which we live and work and raise our families. Revitalization of communities and businesses often requires development. If a historically Lake County-based business were to need

a larger facility to take the next steps in its growth, for example, why should they be required to move to a different locale, simply because development in State Responsibility Areas was prohibited? Similarly, why should a young member of a long-time Lake County family be forced to look for property elsewhere, rather than developing a home on land once owned by a beloved grandmother?

Sadly, Lake County has many areas, most regrettably including portions of Clear Lake's idyllic North Shore, which have succumbed to blight and are in desperate need of refreshment. Often, new construction, development of a pocket of great promise, is a key accelerant to other revitalization. While much of the community of Lucerne, for example, is in a Local Responsibility Area, why would we limit the value of investment in Lucerne by precluding development of so much of the surrounding area?

While it is formidable and costly, wildfire is also not the only threat we face. As previously referenced, many higher population density areas have struggled to contain COVID-19, and capacity for pandemic response is a matter of significant statewide and national security. Does inviting greater population density in urban centers reflect the lessons we have learned?

SB 55 also fails to recognize the depth of the statewide housing crisis we are facing – a crisis disproportionately affecting low and very-low income individuals and families, including many in Lake County. Why enact policy, at this moment in our history, that could further increase housing costs for some of the most vulnerable California residents?

For the reasons detailed above, we cannot, in good conscience, support SB 55, as presently written.

Instead, let's work to build smarter, with Firewise practices informed at the local level. 2020's SB 182 was one example.

We must resolve our real need to mitigate and prevent further devastation in California's wildfire-prone communities, and it should be done with the involvement and engagement of local residents.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (707) 263-2368.

Respectfully,

**COUNTY OF LAKE**

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Bruno Sabatier, Chair

cc: Honorable State Senator Mike McGuire  
Honorable Assembly Member Cecilia Aguiar-Curry