

Our View: Trying that ‘vision thing’ in Buellton

A community movement in Buellton that began more than two years ago will reach another milestone in the coming months, as civic leaders launch a visioning process that should provide a clear picture of where the city is heading.

The visioning process, which will be outlined and discussed at a council meeting next month, involves a thorough review of Buellton’s urban design plan, rules for mixed-use development and zoning ordinances.

City officials may couch all this activity in bureaucratic terms, but what the visioning process really is all about is this: Citizens of Buellton drawing up a blueprint for their city’s future — and we hope a large and diverse group of people will participate.

This may sound like a common set of steps that would be taken by any growing city, but they may never have been taken in Buellton if not for a citizens group, Buellton is Our Town, whose members had grown weary — and more than a little suspicious — of the goings-on at City Hall.

So they decided to seize the initiative — quite literally — by getting Measure E on the ballot, which ultimately won a showdown with a similar City Council-backed ballot initiative — and Buellton was on the path to a future where private development outside the city’s urban growth boundary would require the approval of a majority of voters.

This visioning process is a natural extension of that earlier communitywide effort, and it’s yet another demonstration of how highly motivated citizens can not only change a local government’s course but also get a majority of local citizens excited about the governing process.

The visioning plan couldn’t come at a better time. Buellton’s longtime city manager, Steve Thompson, recently retired, and the council will be interviewing candidates for that important job just as the visioning process ramps up. This lucky coincidence will give the city’s elected officials an opportunity to make sure the new executive is just as interested in creating a blueprint for the future as the city’s citizens obviously are.

It likely won’t be a bump-free ride to a new plan. The battle between competing ballot measures provoked by Buellton is Our Town revealed a deep schism between the City Council and the general population — which means we can expect some spirited debate in the months ahead about what direction the city should take.

To make sure the debate is meaningful, however, city officials are inviting everyone to take part in the process. Once the overall strategy is settled upon by city staff and the council, a series of workshops will be scheduled at which every point of view will, we hope, be expressed.

We'll do our part by encouraging folks to participate, publishing the workshop dates and times in advance, and updating readers on what happens at the workshops. The rest will be up to the citizens of Buellton. This should be exciting.