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LAME-DUCK SUPERVISORS MAY SWAY MARGARITA VOTE

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It will be the last vote of their last meeting, and to many it will be their legacy.

Sometime Tuesday afternoon, Harry Ovitt and Jerry Lenthall will join the other three county supervisors and either give final approval to the Santa Margarita Ranch development or kick it to their successors. The next time the Board of Supervisors meets after that will be Jan. 5, to swear in Adam Hill and Frank Mecham, the men voters chose June 3 to replace, respectively, Lenthall and Ovitt.

The final vote could hardly have been more symbolic. If they cross the final "t" on the Santa Margarita Ranch proposal, they will be setting in motion one of the largest developments in county history.

They also will be cementing their reputation with their critics as supervisors who, with Katcho Achadjian, the third vote in a frequent 3-2 majority, decide matters in favor of developers rather

than their Planning Commission and professional planning staff.

Supporters view the duo differently.

They see Lenthall and Ovitt as bringing common sense and justifiable progress to a county whose growth they consider unduly strangled by green-tinged planners. They see the two men as keeping applicants from losing time and money on well-regulated projects because of mulish, inflexible hard-core environmentalists.

These conflicting points of view have defined Ovitt during his 16 years and Lenthall during his one four-year term, to the point where they and Achadjian have become known as "The Three Amigos" and "The Gang of Three."

Among the highly controversial land-use issues where the board has split 3-2, with Jim Patterson and Bruce Gibson on the losing end:

* The so-called view shed ordinance, a set of regulations designed to protect views of the hills

along the county's pristine North Coast; and

* Gravel mining in the Salinas River watershed.

The 14,000-acre Santa Margarita Ranch, however, is the granddaddy among land-use proposals.

In the works for years, it could ultimately create wineries, more than 500 homes, houses of worship, an amphitheater, a golf course, a horse ranch, a livestock sales yard, a guest ranch, a bed and breakfast, a sewage treatment plant, cemetery expansion, restaurants, craft studios, galleries and shops, among other components.

All this would be built in and near the tiny Santa Margarita community north of the Cuesta Grade, where only 1,100 people now live.

On Nov. 18, supervisors tentatively approved the first phase of the project, a move that, if they uphold it Tuesday, will put an estimated 300 people in 111 homes on 1-to 1.5-acre lots in a 3,778-acre agricultural cluster subdivision.

The vote was 3-2, with the familiar breakdown of Achadjian, Lenthall and Ovitt versus Patterson

and Gibson.

And, as has often been the case, it came despite opposition from numerous groups, including the League of Women Voters, the Department of Fish and Game, ECOSLO, the Sierra Club, the Air Pollution Control District, Caltrans, and the county's own agricultural, water and planning experts.

To finish the job, supervisors on Tuesday must declare "statements of overriding considerations," basically saying, yes, this proposal creates problems-- with environment, water, wildlife, oak trees, cattle ranching, agriculture -- but the development is essential to the public good.

They have to define that public good under the law.

These seem like steep hills to climb, but that sort of overwhelming opposition has not stopped this triumvirate before.

So, although Lenthall and Ovitt will vote on other matters Tuesday -- including garbage rates, substance abuse and agricultural preserves--the final vote may be the one county residents remember the longest.