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**HEADLINE:** Inland Voters Use Recall as a Way to Slow Growth

**BYLINE:** Ashley Powers and Susannah Rosenblatt, Times Staff Writers

**BODY:**

The dust-up in Muscoy began on a December night last year, when a newly elected county supervisor came to talk about cleaning up ratty neighborhoods and luring businesses.

Linda Thacker pictured her avocado orchard being razed to make way for another wave of red-tile roofs and latte drinkers. She had roosted in this small, unincorporated pocket near Cal State San Bernardino much of her life, and preferred living next door to chickens and goats.

"I don't want my neighbors so close that I can hear them flush their toilets," Thacker said.

So she and other residents decided they wanted to give San Bernardino County Supervisor Josie Gonzales the bum's rush -- California style. They launched a recall campaign.

At first glance, the effort seems out of character for the Inland Empire, a land of bounty for developers and home buyers, where many cities have earned reputations as YIMBYs -- Yes, in My Backyard. Riverside County recently ranked as the state's fastest-growing county, census figures show, and Rancho Cucamonga and Fontana in San Bernardino County were among the nation's 15 fastest-growing cities.

But the swarms of newcomers, and the traffic and crowding that follow them, have ignited pockets of rebellion.

Recall supporters in Muscoy followed the lead of outraged residents in Murrieta, where voters last spring ousted the pro-growth mayor in the city's first-ever recall. Residents of Palm Springs, Temecula, Redlands and Norco also have skirmished recently with elected officials or developers over growth.

The Inland Empire's growing pains mirror earlier struggles in the San Fernando Valley, Orange County and east Los Angeles County, as city residents fled to the suburbs, said Jim Mulvihill, a professor of urban planning at Cal State San Bernardino.

"It's a domino effect that follows the freeways," Mulvihill said. A city brims with people, development travels to the next offramp, and entrenched residents there get fed up with traffic and disappearing countryside, he said.

"We think, 'Oh, it's got to stop someplace,' but it hasn't yet," he said.

In 2002, researchers from Rutgers and Cornell universities derided Riverside and San Bernardino counties as the nation's worst examples of urban sprawl, far outranking other metropolises on a "sprawlometer" that measured whether areas had strong social cores, accessible streets and a mix of homes and jobs.

Regional planners expect to see more construction coupled with more wrangling. Between 2003 and 2004, building permits for single-family homes jumped 20% in the two counties, to 43,211.

Though the pace of building has leveled off, San Bernardino County's population is expected to swell 40% in 25 years, and Riverside County's should double, according to the Southern California Assn. of Governments.

In Murrieta, a city that has ballooned near the junction of Interstates 15 and 215 north of Temecula, the population has nearly quadrupled to about 75,000 since 1990, thanks to its strategic location for commuters who work in San Diego, Orange or Los Angeles counties.

The city's unbridled growth so infuriated a group of activist residents that they recalled Mayor Jack van Haaster in May, and nearly booted Councilman Kelly Seyarto.

"The residents found [they] couldn't relax for a second or somebody stuck in a project on you," said attorney Ed Faunce, a former spokesman for Rescue Murrieta, the recall group that sought to address the problem of snarled roads and safeguard open space.

The City Council in Norco -- nicknamed Horse Town, U.S.A. -- rejected a project that would squeeze 171 homes on half a golf course, scraping the tops off hillsides. While in settlement talks with the developer, who sued, council members placed a growth-stalling measure on the November ballot that would make it harder to convert horse lots into strip malls.

Residents moved inland "in part for the orange groves and rock and chaparral and farm fields," Andy McCue, managing director at UC Riverside's Edward J. Blakely Center for Sustainable Suburban Development, said of the region's antigrowth activists. "They thought it was going to stay that way, and when it didn't, they got upset. What they were running away from was following them. There's this disappointment that translates to political action."

The city of Temecula sued Riverside County in 2003, accusing it of not building enough roads to keep pace with the home construction just outside the city limits. The county later agreed as part of a settlement of the suit to require developers to have funding for road improvements in place before building permits are issued.

"Existing residents should not have to bear the consequences of new residents," said Jeff Stone, a former Temecula councilman who was elected to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors last fall largely because of his efforts to stem growth.

Vacation destination Palm Springs, a city of nearly 50,000, lost development for two decades to Coachella Valley neighbors Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage and La Quinta, said City Manager David H. Ready.

The City Council has labored to maintain charm and boost local revenues with major retailers near the city's edge. Yet local preservationists have adopted the battle cry "We don't want to be Orange County," Ready said.

In a March special election, voters sent a mixed message. They voted to stop a golf course development and hotel along the Santa Rosa mountain range, but shot down a plan to protect about 55 square miles of mountain land by limiting developers to one home per 40 acres.

Backers of so-called smart growth characterized the antigrowth campaigns as shortsighted, jeopardizing tax revenue that could improve city services.

Business leaders in the university town of Redlands, which traditionally has embraced slow growth, were so concerned about an antigrowth measure on the November ballot that they commissioned the **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College to assess the possible impact on city finances.

The measure has a long list of growth-stalling provisions, including reducing apartment construction and

restricting the size of many new buildings.

The study found that the measure could diminish city funds by allowing neighbors such as Loma Linda and Banning to capture sales and property taxes, and warned that slowing growth further could stall nearly \$60 million in planned city projects.

"I liken it to my checkbook," said Redlands chamber executive director Kathie Thurston. "I have to have money coming in for me to write a check at the end of the month."

The fear of losing their mostly rural way of life is what triggered the recall campaign in Muscoy, a community of nearly 9,000 where squat dwellings and crowing roosters sit next to multi-story homes shaded by lush gardens.

Linda Thacker and other residents in Muscoy and unincorporated Bloomington targeted Supervisor Josie Gonzales after she supported creating a redevelopment area, which could make over the community.

Recall backers, who are still collecting signatures, fear that the move could allow the county to slash lot sizes and turn Muscoy into a mini-Fontana -- a city where Gonzales was a councilwoman and whose population has almost doubled in the last 15 years.

But Gonzales said that recall backers misunderstood her plan, calling it a way for residents to control how Muscoy expands, especially after the Foothill Freeway to San Bernardino is finished, pumping more traffic through town.

"I think they're beginning to realize we're not a seven-headed monster," said San Bernardino County Redevelopment Administrator John Nowak, whose staff has met with residents almost monthly, though recall backers are convinced that the ballot box is the only way to prevent sprawl.

Moreno Valley voters figured the same thing in 1986, when they recalled three of five city council members labeled as pro-development.

Two decades later -- with its population soaring to about 166,000 -- Moreno Valley, near Riverside, is tagged by the U.S. Census Bureau as one of the nation's fastest-growing cities.

**GRAPHIC:** GRAPHIC: MAP: Rethinking development CREDIT: Los Angeles Times PHOTO: DISPUTE: Linda Thacker is one of a group in Muscoy trying to recall San Bernardino County Supervisor Josie Gonzales. PHOTOGRAPHER: Irfan Khan Los Angeles Times PHOTO: (IE)FOE: Myra Hazlett feeds a kid at her farm and residence in Muscoy. She opposes the proposed redevelopment of Muscoy. PHOTOGRAPHER: Irfan Khan Los Angeles Times

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