The housing market flopped, and global warming became an issue of overarching concern. Without question, those were the two biggest land use stories of 2007 here in California. Those two stories alone made it a big year for California land use news.

Of course, those of us who write about land use in California like to think that every year is a big year for land-use news. After all, with 100 million acres and 37.7 million people, California has the right basic ingredients.

So, it’s not surprising that 2007 offered plenty in the way of big land-use stories. And we’ve selected what we think are the 10 most important. Some of these stories have been around in various forms for many years, while others are only now coming to the fore. Some are stories of statewide and even national significance. Others are important regionally or locally. We think it’s an interesting mix, and we’re willing to bet that all of these stories will continue to evolve during 2008.

With that, here are California Planning & Development Report’s 10 Most Important Land Use Stories of 2007:

1. The Housing Bust

For nearly 10 years, housing has dominated not only the land-use debate, but dinner table discussions. While prices shot through the roof and the demand appeared limitless, we all forgot that no housing market remains strong forever. 2007 brought everyone back to Earth. Statewide, the median price for single-family homes dropped by more than 10%. Housing starts decreased by 31%; housing starts during November were at their lowest level since 1981. While California’s shortage of housing that is affordable to poor and working-class people remains a problem, no one expects a great deal more housing activity during 2008, except possibly in the foreclosure market.

2. Climate Change
Seemingly every land-use policy discussion in California these days is colored by the issue of global climate change. Part of the reason is the lawsuit that Attorney General Jerry Brown filed against San Bernardino County over that county’s handling of climate change during a general plan update. Brown’s office settled the lawsuit when the county agreed to take a number of modest steps that could limit greenhouse gas emissions, but the point was made: Climate change is an issue that must be addressed within the California Environmental Quality Act process. That assertion was confirmed when the Legislature approved AB 97, which charged the Resources Agency with adopting CEQA Guidelines for greenhouse gas emissions by 2010.

3. Southern California firestorms

The fires that struck Southern California during October were not as destructive as those of four years earlier. Still, the wind-driven fires did destroy more than 1,000 houses and, at one point, more than 500,000 people in San Diego County alone had to evacuate their homes. While the fires rekindled discussions of how to create fire-safe subdivisions, the blazes for one the first times also had people questioning whether development should be permitted at all in the most hazardous areas.

4. Legislature approves flood control package

If it’s not fires in California, it’s floods. Six bills aimed at improving the coordination of flood control and land-use planning in the Central Valley and Bay Delta region won approval in September. The legislation requires the state to prepare new flood plain maps and a Central Valley flood protection, and mandates that cities and counties incorporate the flood protection plan into general plans. The legislation also increases the level of flood protection required in urban and urbanizing areas as of 2015. The result of all this could very well be a curtailing of new subdivisions in low-lying areas.

5. Teeing up the eminent domain rematch

Although the U.S. Supreme Court issued its controversial Kelo decision upholding the use of eminent domain for economic development purposes in 2005, and California voters rejected an initiative advertised as eminent domain reform in 2006, questions about the government’s use of eminent domain did not vanish during 2007. Instead, the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and the California Farm Bureau Federation moved forward with an initiative that would restrict eminent domain powers. The initiative appears headed for the June 2008 ballot — the same ballot that is likely to have a competing, more modest initiative prepared by local government associations. This could become the most important
6. Bay Delta environmental crisis

In November, biologists found only four Delta smelt where in past years they scooped up the tiny fish by the hundreds. The endangered fish is considered an indicator species, and what it indicated in 2007 was environmental peril in the Delta, which provides water for two-thirds of the state’s homes and millions of acres of farmland. At different times, a state judge and a federal judge ordered cutbacks in pumping from the Delta. Meanwhile, numerous academics, interest groups and government agencies said the state must drastically change the way it manages the Delta.

7. State Supreme Court rejects project water analysis

In February, the California Supreme Court said the water analysis for a 20,000-unit housing project in the City of Rancho Cordova was inadequate. In its closely watched decision, the court said a water analysis must discuss not only the likelihood of future water sources materializing, but also alternative water sources — and the impacts of tapping those alternatives — should the likely sources not materialize. Development lawyers said virtually no EIR could pass the test established by the state Supreme Court, although an appellate court late in the year upheld a study for a proposed housing development in Los Angeles County.

8. Sacramento approves rail yard reuse

In December, the Sacramento City Council approved a plan to convert 240-acres of largely unused rail yards just north of downtown into a new urban district with 12,000 housing units, office towers, hotels, a cultural district, waterfront development and extensive retail areas. The project is one of the most ambitious urban infill efforts in the country.

9. Planning paralysis in Monterey County

No place in California has more contentious land-use politics than Monterey County, as evidenced by an election in June. That was when voters said no to a relatively growth-friendly general plan update prepared by the county (the fourth version of the update in a process that started in 1999) and to a general plan written by slow-growth advocates. Voters also denied a 1,100-unit housing development in an area north of Salinas that has been considered a growth area since at least the early 1980s. The election sent everyone either back to the drawing board, or back to the courtroom.
10. Ballot-box zoning

Although voting on local land use matters was fairly quiet in 2007, ballot-box zoning never goes away entirely. In April, voters in Dixon overturned a City Council decision approving a new horse racing track, entertainment center, hotel, and retail and office development on 230 acres. In May, voters in Santa Paula became the first in Ventura County to approve a major boundary expansion since voter-mandated growth boundaries swept the county starting during the mid-1990s. Voters in the poor city were willing to bust the boundary for 500 upper-end houses, a resort hotel and a golf course.

- Paul Shigley and Bill Fulton