

Keeping Open Space Lands Between Our Cities

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, May 2007

Ventura County stands apart from the other counties in Southern California because it still has greenbelts between its cities. Unlike other counties such as Los Angeles where open space lands were envisioned to separate Sherman Oaks from Van Nuys, Woodland Hills from Reseda, Ventura County has succeeded in keeping its cities distinct.

There have been several measures adopted to keep the ranch lands, open space and agricultural lands that separate Ventura County cities from being urbanized. The County's General Plan has its Guidelines for Orderly Development which call for development to occur within the cities where there are urban services. SOAR (Save Open space and Agricultural Resources) enforces the Guidelines by requiring a vote of the people to rezone the greenbelt buffers. This has discouraged developers from building outside of cities and instead focus their attention on redeveloping and revitalizing urban areas. SOAR has been on the books for almost ten years and has another twelve to go if it is not reinstated.

Greenbelt agreements and ordinances are another long term mechanism for protecting the areas between our cities. Currently there are Greenbelt Agreements between several of the cities and the County that call for a policy of non-urbanization and non-annexation. The County has a goal to make the "handshake agreements" of the Greenbelt Agreements into enforceable ordinances. So far there are two Greenbelt Ordinances between some west county cities and the County to preserve the buffers between them. I have proposed that the Tierra Rejada Greenbelt, located between the cities of Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley and Moorpark also be protected by an enforceable ordinance.

The Tierra Rejada Valley is distinguished from the other greenbelts in the County both in terms of it being the home to a major site-seeing attraction, the Reagan Library, and also because it borders thriving urban cities with relatively little agricultural lands within their city limits. The desire to preserve agricultural lands, used for both ranching and crops, is a unifying theme in our County. The greenbelt land between the cities of Moorpark, Simi Valley, and Thousand Oaks also acts as a buffer from urban sprawl. On a regional level, the Tierra Rejada Valley offers an area of critical inter-mountain linkage between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills, and on a local level, its culverts under the 23 Freeway are used more than any other freeway wildlife crossing in the area.

Recognizing the special features and valuable resources of the Tierra Rejada Valley, a Greenbelt Ordinance can not only help preserve the existing land uses of the Valley, it can also look at incorporating wording to protect its resources. For example in addition to making the agreement an ordinance, the ordinance could also call for protecting lands adjacent to the Reagan Library, prohibiting new high intensity night lighting, and/or acknowledging the importance of wildlife passages, if the parties wish to consider these or other protection measures. Whether or not the ordinance will include these additional

items, just getting the three cities and the County to the table to change our handshake agreement into an enforceable law would be a great step forward.

The timing of this request coincides with efforts that are also underway by the National Park Service, the Reagan Library, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, and The Nature Conservancy for acquisition of easements and key parcels to ensure wildlife connectivity, open space protection and trail access in the Tierra Rejada Valley. It also coincides with efforts by Simi Valley to annex the Reagan Library into their city.

As urbanization continues to put pressure on our County, tightening the protections of our greenbelts can help keep our cities vibrant and our greenbelts free from urban sprawl.