

Open Space and Agricultural Land Preservation: Make No Small Plans by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, September 2007

The General Plan for Ventura County and our SOAR (Save Open space and Agricultural Resources) laws call for urban development to occur in the cities and not in the unincorporated county where the vast majority of open space and agricultural lands are found. Yet over 2,000 houses are planned on agricultural land at the edge of Oxnard using a yet to be tried exemption under SOAR for affordable housing. In the Tierra Rejada Valley we continue to see proposals for more development, including a recent proposal to build a large church, 5,000 seat amphitheater and bible college using a yet to be tried religious exemption to land use controls. Additionally, using a State exemption for schools, Cal State Channel Islands, known as a “green” campus, proposes to pave over 75 acres of agricultural land to put in a parking lot at the entrance to the college.

While Ventura County has made tremendous headway in preserving agricultural lands through its planning blueprint and SOAR measures, there is more that can be done and more that needs to be done. One shining beacon in open space and agricultural preservation can be found in the California county of Sonoma.

Sonoma County passed an open space tax that has been used to purchase over 70,000 acres of open space and agricultural land since the tax was approved by voters in 1990. Sonoma voters recently re-affirmed their sales tax and added money for open space maintenance, not just acquisition. Wetlands have been preserved, major viewsheds have been spared from the bulldozer, new regional parks have been added, and farmland easements have been purchased by their Open Space District and leased at low cost to local farmers.

Compare the 70,000 acres preserved in Sonoma County with the draft for the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) Regional Comprehensive Plan that seeks to have 6,500 acres purchased for farmland preservation by 2035 in the six-county SCAG region that includes the counties of Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Imperial. While not as ambitious, the reality is that open space land in Southern California is more expensive to purchase for the very reason it is so important to preserve--the demand to develop it is high.

Growth in California is expected to continue to concentrate in the coastal areas, with the cheaper farmland areas being the most desirable to developers. Cropland has been rapidly decreasing and efforts to protect prime farmland have been fought by the development industry. Look no further than Ventura County where prime farmland that is not protected by a vote of the people through our SOAR initiatives, is rapidly being converted to housing and shopping centers.

Farmers who seek to sell their land to developers, have joined developers in successfully fighting off several efforts I supported to help preserve Ventura County farmland for

farming. For example, I initiated a requirement that developers include some buffer land between their new development and neighboring farmland. The buffer, to be required on the developer's land, would protect farmers from urban encroachment that threatens their operations, and protect homes and schools from the dust, pesticides, noise and odors associated with farming. I also proposed a requirement to set aside farmland in another place to make up for cementing over prime farmland (a similar requirement exists for cementing over wetlands and oak woodlands). This too was fought by the same coalition of developers, and farmers seeking to develop their farmland.

One of the more significant efforts to preserve agricultural and open space lands was an attempt by Supervisor Bennett and me to limit the number of large tracts of land being subdivided into ten acre lots and sold for large lot homes, sometimes referred to as ranchettes. You need look no further than the Tierra Rejada Valley to see the kind of rural sprawl that occurs when Open Space zoning allows for 10 acre minimum lot sizes. I've asked for the cities and the County to come together to strengthen the protections of the Tierra Rejada Valley and in October a meeting between the cities and County will be held to discuss measures that can be taken to better protect the area.

In Sonoma the first priority for the money from their quarter-cent sales tax goes to purchasing the lands that separate their cities. Purchasing the land is the best way to ensure its preservation in perpetuity. A recent attempt to add a quarter-cent sales tax to purchase open space in Ventura County was defeated when the necessary 66% voter approval was not achieved. When Sonoma first approved their sales tax in 1990 they needed only a 50% plus one majority to pass it. When they went to voters again in 2006, it was approved by 75% of the voters. The voters in Sonoma County had witnessed first hand the benefits of the public purchase of open space for permanent preservation and they are continuing the legacy.

SOAR will expire in twelve and one half years and we must work to see it reinstated and look to further protections. It is heartening to see the success of Sonoma County's efforts that have been widely embraced by citizens--including farmers who want to continue farming. Setting our sights high in Ventura County and in our region is critical to realizing the vision so many of us hold.