

Ten Facts on SOAR - Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources

by Supervisor Linda Parks, August 2016

As we near the vote in November on whether to extend to 2050 the Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources (SOAR) law which gives residents the right to vote on urban sprawl projects, here are 10 things to consider:

1) Ventura County's moderate temperatures, coupled with our beautiful topography and natural open spaces, were why we were recently awarded the title of the "most desirable place to live in the nation" by the Wall Street Journal. We could urbanize the open space and farmland, but do we want more traffic congestion, air pollution, overcrowding and associated health impacts?

2) SOAR did not create the affordable housing crisis. Contrary to housing industry boosters, paving over farmland and open space doesn't make houses more affordable. Orange County is a prime example. The median housing price in Orange County, where nearly all of their farmland has been lost, is \$100,000 more than in Ventura County.

3) SOAR exempts affordable housing projects from a vote of the people if it can be shown there is no other place to accommodate affordable housing within city urban boundaries. It makes sense to have affordable housing where residents can access urban services such as schools, buses, stores and jobs.

4) Downtowns are invested in and reinvigorated because of SOAR. There are 1,200 units of housing approved in the city of Ventura alone, although their construction was stalled by the recession. Some of those projects are now starting to get built. They are all infill projects instead of sprawl projects in the farmland because SOAR is in place.

5) SOAR encourages cost-efficient land use patterns by limiting sprawl development. It is more costly for municipalities to deliver urban services to distant sprawl developments. Extending services into farmland and open space drains tax dollars, is inefficient, and unsustainable. It is also no coincidence that the counties in Southern California that fared most poorly during the recession were the ones that overdeveloped, building thousands of houses that remain unsold.

6) SOAR protects some of the best farming topsoil in the nation and supports one of the largest job markets and industries in Ventura County, and it is good for the economy. Since SOAR started in 1998, the value of farming gross income in Ventura County has more than doubled and the rate of growth of agricultural gross income has exceeded that of the U.S. economy.

7) SOAR keeps growth manageable and is a major reason why Ventura County is one of the safest counties, with two of the safest cities in the nation. Smaller communities where people know each other, with faster emergency response times because there is less traffic, and with government agencies that aren't overwhelmed with big city crime are some of the benefits of not growing beyond our means.

8) SOAR isn't no-growth. Since 1998, there have been 11 development proposals that required a SOAR vote of the people and voters approved six of them.

9) SOAR compels our elected leaders to discuss and address the issue of affordable housing. In fact, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors recently put aside one million dollars as matching funds for affordable housing projects countywide.

10) SOAR also compels our elected leaders to help ensure agriculture is successful in Ventura County as exemplified by zoning exemptions for the development of farmworker housing. Another example is the County stepping up to fund the Williamson Act after the State backed out of providing tax relief for farmers if they agree not to develop their property for ten to twenty years.

Voters have a choice to make in November whether to continue SOAR and its open space and farmland protections that distinguish Ventura County. First approved in 1998, SOAR has been popular because it has made Ventura County the only county in Southern California to say no to urban sprawl, the results of which speak louder than words!