



Commentary

The following article was posted on November 25th, 2008, in the New Times - Volume 23, Issue 17

Messages to the new board, part 3:

Let's protect our agriculture and save ourselves

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE SIERRA CLUB SANTA LUCIA CHAPTER

Editor's note: This is the third of five monthly Sierra Club commentaries devoted to policy recommendations for the incoming County Board of Supervisors

Preserving agriculture is a widely shared goal that has supposedly been one of our county government's top priorities for decades. Generations have loved and carefully managed their land, recognizing the connection between protecting the environment and keeping their land healthy and productive.

For years, county leaders have talked up how much they love our farmers and ranchers. But many county ordinances and policies essentially require farmers and ranchers to become developers in order to stay farmers and ranchers, or provide irresistible incentives for developers, who buy farmland and rangeland to develop non-ag-related enterprises that the county allows smack dab in the middle of productive ag land.

Once, no one could have envisioned our county as the next Napa Valley or a destination for wealthy retirees searching for idyllic places with nice weather to build their retirement mansions on acreage. But the unintended consequences of many of the county's misguided ag policies—many of them written in language vague enough for a developer's consultant to drive a bulldozer through—are now crystal clear: A feeding frenzy of land speculation under the guise of preserving agriculture. Calling a sprawling residential subdivision an "ag cluster" or a commercial/retail center "ag tourism" is putting that famous lipstick on that well-known pig.

To be fair, the county has some pretty good policies for protecting agriculture. The problem, Honorable Supervisors, is that your predecessors have been willing to ignore or reinterpret them, and we are now heading to a tipping point where local agriculture may just collapse under the weight of those bad decisions.

In the long term, we need innovative and tightly written ag policies aimed at developing a local, sustainable food system. For starters, you could:

Place a moratorium on parcelization and fragmentation of ag land.

Review and revise the long list of non-ag allowable uses and tighten the rules for what uses truly are "secondary and incidental" to agriculture.

Adopt and implement Strategic Growth principles to help define a long-term vision for the county's urban and rural areas.

Reconsider the non-inclusion of ag policies in the Conservation Element update or schedule an update of our ag policies as a stand-alone document.

Rescind the Transfer of Development Credit (TDC) program or rewrite it so it actually benefits agriculture, not just speculators who have exploited its weaknesses.

Look at minimum parcel sizes relative to soil types and do what it takes to protect our soils.

Adopt only new ordinances (including ordinances for Ag Tourism and Events) that will truly benefit real farmers and ranchers who want to supplement the income from their real farms and ranches with some small—genuinely secondary and incidental—enterprise.

Revisit the precedent set by the Estrella River Vineyards soils classification decision.

Safeguard the Williamson Act as though the future of this county depended on it, which it does. The act is a contract between taxpayers and agriculturalists, yet the Ag Preserve Rules Committee has no one representing taxpayers. Diluting that covenant to allow non-ag uses on contracted land (airstrips, large inns, event centers) violates the contract with the taxpayers, who subsidize the program to support farmers and ranchers, not developers.

Consider a new zoning designation, call it “ag commercial retail,” to encourage centralized production facilities and tourism-generating operations in strategically located areas in the county, near urban centers things that would cause traffic, noise, and degradation of air quality in rural areas that don't need to be built on quality soils.

Consider an open-space zoning designation (See California Government Code 65910: “Every city and county by December 31, 1973, shall prepare and adopt an open-space zoning ordinance”).

Confine industrial and heavily commercial enterprises to suitably zoned land in urban areas.

Finally, take a serious look at global climate change. Our economy survives on tourism and agriculture. That interdependence, especially with the wine industry, is self-evident. We can hope the impacts of climate change on agriculture won't be as dire as predicted and we will have time to adapt, but no matter what else you do to protect our quality of life, land, water, and air, a head-in-the-sand approach on climate change will doom all else.

The last eight years have made many of us want to stick our heads in the sand. We now have reason to hope for the future of our country, and we count on you to give us reason to hope for the future of the county. Swift and decisive actions to protect our agricultural heritage would be a great start.

The Santa Lucia Chapter represents the Sierra Club's 2,500 members in San Luis Obispo County. The Executive Committee includes Karen Merriam, Jack Morrow, John Ashbaugh, Cleve Nash, Steven Marx, Judith Bernstein, and Cal French.