

Can Sacramento County Keep Its Farmers?

On February 7, 2018, four LAFCo Commissioners approved a change in Sacramento County policies and began the unravelling of decades of agricultural protection, orderly urban growth and open space planning that relied on a firm urban limit line at Elk Grove's southern boundary. The decision — called a Sphere of Influence Amendment — was opposed by three of the seven Commissioners. This split decision has given Elk Grove the go-ahead to plan for urbanization on 1,156 acres of farmland south of its present boundary. Elk Grove intends to pave over much more than this in coming years.

The environmental community has asked the 7 member Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) to reconsider the decision, a procedure included in the The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000. This state law charges the Commission with ensuring orderly growth and preserving farmland and open space when it considers changes in city boundaries.

In this case, the Sacramento LAFCo Commission adopted a "Statement of Overriding Considerations" prepared by staff to dismiss 22 significant and unavoidable impacts that cannot be fully mitigated. One is conflict with the Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the County. This MTP underpins all federal and state funding for transportation in the region. Other impacts include loss of farmland and open space, groundwater depletion and water supply, and growth inducement. One dissenting commissioner praised the Environmental Impact Report, but damned its "Statement of Overriding Considerations." Without explanation, the Statement claims that regional and statewide environmental benefits outweigh the many severe impacts.

Some of the impacts of the decision weren't even recognized, though, because they aren't environmental. Notably not discussed by LAFCo was the additional cost to the public to acquire right of way for the Capital Southeast Connector along Kammerer Road because of increased land values stimulated by the approval. Development south of Kammerer Road also contradicts the traffic assumptions underlying the Connector plan.

Commissioners often rely on the Executive Director's Report for key findings, such as how much land is available for development in Elk Grove. Land supply is a key factor in LAFCo's calculation of whether an SOI expansion onto farmland is justified. In this case, about half the 4,000 acres of vacant land in Elk Grove wasn't counted as available, because development projects have been approved. The Executive Director only included land without approved projects in calculating land supply. Over 1,800 acres of open fields in Elk Grove have approved projects, some approved over a decade ago. The case that there's a need for more vacant land was not made.

At the core of this decision is farmland and the agricultural economy in Sacramento County. One commissioner implied that the SOI decision would do no harm to farming because so little of the project area is defined as prime farmland. Yet the Environmental Impact Report identified significant direct and indirect impacts on agriculture (including prime farmland) that could not be mitigated. If we are only prepared to save large swaths of prime farmland, then the agricultural fabric of California will become more tattered and unsustainable. That fabric includes a landscape of different kinds of

farmlands and an economic infrastructure supporting a productive industry. The Sacramento Farm Bureau reports over \$500 million in revenue last year from agriculture in Sacramento County.

Sacramento LAFCo should reverse the February 7, 2018 decision at its Reconsideration hearing April 4. It could take to heart the California Association of LAFCo's recent publication "State of the Art on Agricultural Preservation." and look closely at agricultural preservation. Otherwise, we are facing a dramatic loss of farmers in our region.