

DRAFT (9-21-18)

Initial Discussion Draft (including refinements suggested during September meeting are in yellow)

Vision and Goals to Guide Review of Agricultural Land Use Policy in Contra Costa County

Setting:

Contra Costa County's rich soils, micro-climate, and reliable water supplies have allowed generations of farmers to produce a variety of crops in the County. Contra Costa farmers have grown food for the Bay Area since the Gold Rush; from vast winter wheat fields in the 1880's to sweet corn, peaches and cherries. Before the prohibition, Contra Costa County was home to over fifty wineries, including the largest winery in the world for 12 years (1907-1919), Winehaven, in Richmond. East Contra Costa has a long history of agricultural tourism, including U-pick operations going back to the 1970s. Over 100,000 people travel to Brentwood to pick cherries over Memorial Day weekend, annually. A wide diversity of crops are grown in Contra Costa County from sweet corn, stone fruits, vegetables, and olives, to wine grapes and beef.

Agricultural lands composed primarily of highly fertile Class I or II soils support farming a wide variety of crops and many are irrigated and intensively farmed to produce food, fiber, and plant materials. The majority of East Contra Costa's agricultural lands with Class I or II soils are located east of Brentwood in the County's Agricultural Core, a General Plan Land Use Designation intended to protect and promote agriculture on these high quality lands. The County's remaining intensively cultivated agricultural lands are primarily concentrated there, in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and in the surrounding plain of Eastern Contra Costa County.

Agriculture thrives in other areas of the County as well. The Tassajara Valley area supports thousands of acres of rangeland. That area is at a crossroad; historic farming and ranching activities are merging with rural residential development, habitat conservation, public lands, and various other activities. Briones, Morgan Territory, and Las Trampas areas are also facing similar land use transitions and challenges.

Contra Costa County's History of Land Use Regulations:

In 1978, the Board of Supervisors adopted the *East County Area General Plan*, which included the new Agricultural Core (Ag Core) land use designation. The adopted policies were intended to preserve and protect East County's prime agricultural soils. In 1990, County voters approved Measure C, establishing the 65/35 Land Preservation Plan and Urban Limit Line (ULL) requiring at least 65 percent of all land in the county be preserved for "non-urban" uses such as agriculture, open space, wetlands, and parks. Measure C also required a 40-acre minimum parcel size for prime agricultural lands. In 2006, voters approved Measure L, which extended the term of the ULL through 2026 and placed limitations on changes to the boundary. The required 2016 review of the ULL determined capacity existed inside the ULL to accommodate jobs and housing growth through 2036.

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Policies have also been adopted to protect and encourage the economic viability of agricultural land. For example, the County has adopted Farmstand, Farm-Market, and Right to Farm Ordinances to protect existing uses and allow some new ones.

Vision and Goals for the Future of Agriculture in Contra Costa County:

A thriving agricultural sector, including sustainable agricultural lands and a vibrant and diverse agricultural economy, should remain a high priority for the County in setting land use policy.

The following are primary goals for the future of agriculture in Contra Costa County:

- Build on the unique assets of Contra Costa County to make agriculture more vibrant and sustainable. These assets include rich soils, the unique and varied climate, high-quality rangeland, reliable water supply, proximity to a major metropolitan area, natural beauty and the recognized expertise of County farmers and ranchers.
- Enable production of a diverse array of high-quality crops and agricultural products. The diversified production will make the agricultural sector more adaptable and resilient to changes in market conditions.
- Provide farmers greater opportunity to capitalize on the beauty, quality, diversity and accessibility of farmland in the County. Agricultural tourism and direct marketing opportunities should be supported and expanded.
- Protect the natural resources necessary for a thriving agricultural economy, beneficial to the quality of life for residents in the agricultural areas, important for climate resilience and ecological health and representing an important piece of the natural heritage of future generations (e.g. soil, water and water quality, air quality, biotic resources).
- Adapt regulation to meet the unique needs of the agricultural community, including making County permitting as efficient and flexible as possible (while maintaining effective regulatory protections), communicating clearly and often with the agricultural constituency and ensuring that enforcement is effective.
- Improve the sustainability of agricultural communities, by retaining and enhancing the attractive, rural, natural, agricultural character of these areas and by discouraging non-conforming uses **that blight the community**, while also reflecting that farmers have a right to farm.
- Recognize that finite resources (water, transportation, space) require a balanced approach to rural development.
- Support opportunities for urban agriculture, where appropriate.