

# Farmland Working Group

*Striving to protect food, families & farmland. Since 1999.*

## Riverbank needs to rethink gigantic River Walk growth proposal

By Denny Jackman - *Special To The Modesto Bee*  
September 20, 2021

We all can't live in the garden. This garden, this one in the heart of California. The one that produces over 300 different crops, a bounty that produces thousands of jobs, helps to feed families of the world and make life more enjoyable. To propose that senior citizen housing would be a better use of the incredible soils that exist under the proposed Riverwalk project west of Riverbank and north of Modesto is like saying we seniors are stupid!

That we didn't learn from our parents, that we weren't paying attention when the Los Angeles basin turned from agriculture to acrimony. That we didn't notice when the Bay Area became concrete and noisy and that Stanislaus County started to become the end of a 100-mile commute sucking up hours out of people's lives for a dream that seldom comes true.



No, we are not stupid. We do remember the 1997 floods that sent the Tuolumne and Stanislaus rivers over their banks, destroying homes and property. Are we to expect that Riverbank officials and the Army Corps of Engineers will hold back the Stanislaus River as it floods again within the Riverwalk project?

How is adding over 1,000 acres of more people to Riverbank going to prevent the cost of water from going sky high for existing residents who are already rationing under our current drought?

I heard that the Riverwalk project is wanted by the property owners. Not entirely true, and so what? Nobody can do more than what it is zoned for. You can't have a hog farm in the middle of a residential zone, and you can't build senior housing over the best farmland in the world without community approval. And there's the rub.

Are community representatives going to be so naive as to wipe out more of our best farmland with hundreds of acres within Riverbank's currently approved (3,728 acres) borders? Why? Where is the need?

Care more for the needs of residents than the wants of some who see sprawl as a means of personal enhancement, while Riverbank citizens pay more for water, fire and police services. We already have plans to consume 88,558 acres within existing cities and their general plans in Stanislaus County. Plus 16,647 acres urbanized or planned to be urbanized in unincorporated communities like Salida and Keyes.

The entire community of Stanislaus would lose some of the very best crop-growing land to concrete and congestion under the cutesy name of Riverwalk. No thank you. Sprawl hurts us all!

Jackman is a controlled growth advocate, a founding member of the Farmland Working Group and a former Modesto City Council member.

“ We already have plans to consume 88,558 acres within existing cities and their general plans in Stanislaus County. Plus 16,647 acres urbanized or planned to be urbanized in unincorporated communities like Salida and Keyes. ”

**Our Mission:** To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.



**WE ARE WATCHING...**

# Central Valley Concerned Citizens

## Update on the Proposed River Walk Specific Plan for Riverbank:

We are fighting the proposal by a private developer to build 2500+ homes on prime agricultural flood plain land in Riverbank. We need your help to write letters and/or attend meetings to stop this development.

According to the City of Riverbank Planning Staff, the **Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR)** for River Walk can be distributed at any time. Once it is released, this begins a 45-day timeline or window of opportunity, to send in written comments. It is extremely important to **submit written comments during this period** so that they will become part of the permanent record. Any comments submitted within this 45-day timeframe will be responded to in writing by the local governing body, as required by law. This will come in the form of being included (responded to) in the Final EIR, which the Riverbank City Council must Certify as Complete for the project to move forward.

### **What does the approval process for a project like this include?**

The City of Riverbank is the Lead Agency so it must first be considered by their Planning Commission. If approved by the Planning Commission, then it will be forwarded to their City Council for consideration and approval of the Final EIR. Because the area that River Walk would be developed in is not yet approved for development, if approved by the Riverbank Council it would then be forwarded to LAFCO (the Local Agency Formation Commission) for consideration.

### **What if I have an attorney who is representing my interests and will be offering written comments on my behalf? Should I still submit written comments?**

Yes, it is vital that you write your own personal concerns. Your attorney would be addressing specific legal issues that may not cover all issues.

It is also critical that if you have related, specialized credentials or expertise, such as with soil or water geology/engineering, a professional land use planner, etc., that you list those credentials in your written response. Then, those credentials/expertise can be relied upon if matters are challenged in Court at a later date. If they have not been entered into the permanent written record, those credentials cannot be considered by a Judge and thus your letter would carry less weight.

### **Can I still offer comments after the 45-day timeframe?**

Yes, so long as the governing body has not yet taken an action to certify the EIR. Riverbank and/or their consultant are not, however, obligated to provide a written response to the comments if they are submitted after the 45-day timeframe.

### **If I have submitted written comments previously, do I need to submit written comments again during the new 45-day timeframe?**

Yes, because this ensures that they will become part of the permanent written record.

### **What if my comments are the same as what I submitted previously?**

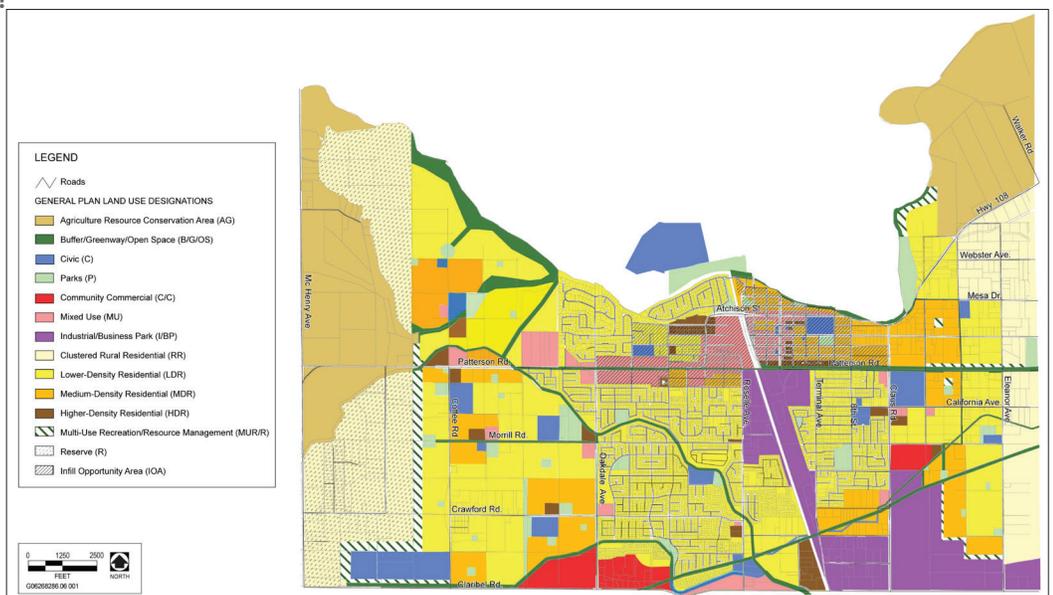
Ideally you would write a new letter that refers to your previous comments, but you would also attach that prior letter to your new letter. This will ensure that your original comments become part of the permanent record. What you should not do, is simply write a letter that says, "Please refer to my prior letter dated 'X'" without attaching the prior letter.

All comments should be submitted whether they are based on science, history, facts, environmental issues, quality of life, etc. Your comments, thoughts, beliefs and opinions are vital to this process.

### **Do I have to write a formal letter, or can I simply send an email?**

Emails are considered written comments, just like letters, and are completely acceptable. We suggest you email your letter to yourself as well as the agency/department you are sending your comments to.

*Continued page 4*



# 2021 Vance Kennedy Award Recipients: Jeani and John Ferrari

## Honoring the Ferraris as Community Supporters, Substantial CFT Donors, and Farmland Protection Advocates

For Jeani and John Ferrari, making a difference in their communities has been a lifelong achievement. Between their efforts in the arts, local healthcare availability, and agriculture, their actions as philanthropists and Central Valley advocates have impacted many. However, most significant to California Farmland Trust (CFT), are their efforts in farmland protection and land use policies in the San Joaquin Valley, that Jeani refers to as “a wonder of the world.”

Their passion and dedication to agriculture and contributions to our organization earned them the great honor of being CFT’s 2021 Vance Kennedy Award recipients. The Vance Kennedy Award was established in 2014 in honor of Dr. Vance Kennedy, a founding member, for his extraordinary contribution to CFT. This same commitment to farmland protection achieved by Dr. Kennedy is also clearly demonstrated by Jeani and John.

### A Life Dedicated to Farmland Protection

Growing up, John, a farmer by trade, worked alongside his father, where he learned not only how to farm various commodities, but also how to steward the land in which they grew. When Jeani married John, she too, became invested in ensuring our valuable farmland is cared for, viable, and plentiful for future generations.

“I didn’t know anything about farming or land use,” Jeani said. “I just married a farmer and thought farmland was everywhere.”

Years later in 1997, Jeani’s interest to learn more about California’s working landscapes and pursue farmland protection on a larger scale was sparked. This led to a call to their local congressman, who pointed her in the direction of the Farmland Working Group. At the time, the group was a collaboration of city planners, council individuals, and farmers, Jeani recalled.

“Our goal was to encourage the counties to protect their resources and promote efficient growth,” Jeani said. “It’s a partnership.”

After one year of attending the meetings, the group decided to publicize the meetings and eventually form a nonprofit organization, of which Jeani spearheads today.

“Once we got started, we were rolling, and local news outlets recognized that we were a force to be reckoned with,” Jeani said.

Over the next few years, Jeani worked with several individuals in Stanislaus County who had the same mission of protecting farmland. She is one of the founding directors of Stanislaus Farmland Trust. In the early 2000s, Stanislaus Farmland Trust and Merced County Farmland and Open Space Trust, two of the primary land trusts in the area, merged. Jeani continued to serve on the board of the newly formed Central Valley Farmland Trust. This organization, CVFT, years later, became California Farmland Trust.

That consolidation gave the two groups more power, as it was more impressive to apply for funding with a bigger entity, Jeani explained. This organization, known as Central Valley Farmland Trust (CVFT), is where CFT’s legacy started.

### Leading with Humboldt Ranch

It’s extremely fitting that the first easement enacted by CVFT in 2005 is Humboldt Ranch, owned and farmed by the Ferraris. Located between the towns of Turlock and Delhi, the 260-acre parcel is within one of Merced County’s premier locations for farming and had the potential to be threatened by surrounding cities.

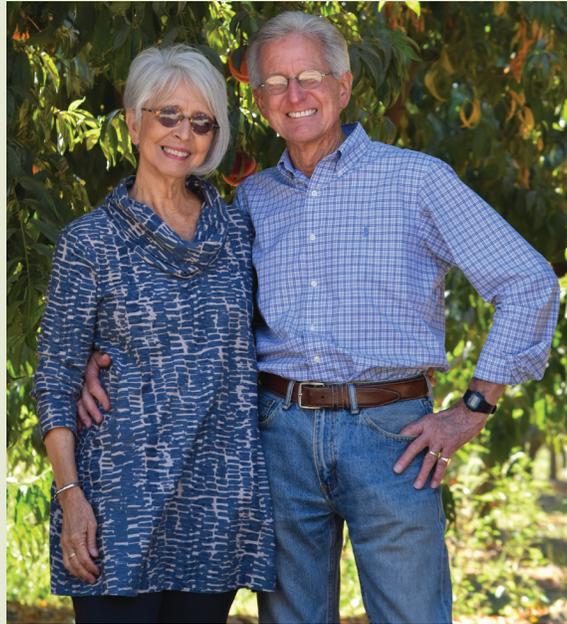
“We felt that if any farmland were to be chosen by a developer to be paved over, this parcel would be a huge target because of its vicinity to the surrounding towns and Highway 99,” John said. “With high quality-soil and a reliable water source, this parcel has everything needed to be valuable farmland, and it’s certainly a source of pride.”

“The lure of the urban development lottery is huge, but if the San Joaquin Valley becomes paved over, we’re going to be in a world of hurt,” John said.

### “The Ferrari Family just loves this farmland.” – Jeani

Jeani and John’s community engagement doesn’t stop at farmland protection. In their community of Turlock, Jeani and John have made an immense impact. John served on Emanuel Medical Center’s Foundation board and fundraising committees in support of the addition of a Cancer Center and the Cardiovascular Operating Suites. Simultaneously, Jeani served on the Revitalization Committee that transformed Turlock’s downtown and helped establish the Turlock Certified Farmers’ Market.

Additionally, as philanthropic supporters of CFT, Jeani and



Continued from page 2

### What are the most important environmental concerns about this project?

There are many, but some of the most critical concerns are related to the following broad categories: groundwater, traffic, building within a floodplain, lack of adequate infrastructure, loss of riparian habitat, and loss of prime agricultural land.

### What are some of the other concerns about the River Walk project?

There are several but here are a few:

- 1) It would create an "island" for some of the existing homes immediately adjacent to the City, in the River Heights/Park Ridge area, which would essentially force them to annex into the City;
- 2) Riverbank was granted an increase to its buildable area, which is referred to as their Sphere of Influence (SOI), of 1,500 acres just five years ago in 2016. That area is only just now starting to develop with some model homes, so the need for another 1,500 acres to be added to their SOI now is not indicated nor justified at this time.
- 3) Property owners who are proposed to be included within the River Walk Specific Plan Area were not notified of this project when the Notice of Preparation was released in June of 2021. Proper notification must be made when the DEIR is released.

Please pay close attention to this project and get involved! Growth should occur in areas of lesser soil quality, not on productive, prime agricultural lands such as exists within the River Walk region. You can get involved now by attending Riverbank Planning Commission and Riverbank City Council meetings,

as well as Stanislaus County LAFCO meetings to voice your opposition. Please check their websites for meeting dates and agendas, but generally the Council meets on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays at 6707 3rd Street, Riverbank; the Planning Commission meets on the 3rd Tuesday at 6707 3rd Street, Riverbank and LAFCO meets on the 4th Wednesday at 1010 10th Street, Modesto (in the basement). All meetings begin at 6 p.m.

Please contact us if you have any questions, suggestions or comments. We would appreciate any and all help. You can email us at Central Valley Concerned Citizens: [centralvalleyconcernedcitizens@gmail.com](mailto:centralvalleyconcernedcitizens@gmail.com)

Thank you.

Farmland Working Group supports the work of Central Valley Concerned Citizens. FWG is not affiliated with the group.



North of Patterson Road and above McHenry Avenue looking east towards the city of Riverbank on Thursday, June 17, 2021. Andy Alfaro [aalfaro@modbee.com](mailto:aalfaro@modbee.com)

Continued from page 3

John have always believed in the bigger picture of CFT's mission and have generously donated to protect the world's best farmland. For years, the Ferraris have been consistent donors to our organization, and this past Big Day of Giving, Jeani and John provided up to \$10,000 in match funding for donated funds – they even went a step further, donating a portion to the Protect Fiorini Ranch fundraising campaign. Their zeal and loyalty to protecting, promoting, and preserving our valuable resources is unparalleled. From the libraries in the city of Turlock and at CSU Stanislaus, to the arts including the Carnegie Arts Center, and all their efforts in between, the Ferrari name reigns proudly throughout their hometown and within CFT.

While Jeani and John wear many hats in their community, at the core, John is a farmer. The Ferraris' farms sprawl throughout Stanislaus and Merced counties, where they grow almonds, walnuts, sweet potatoes, and peaches. Like many farmers, Jeani and John wanted to protect their farm because they wanted their future generations to have the opportunity to farm it as well. The easement on Humboldt Ranch gave them the power and freedom to do so. At the time their easement was executed, ACEs were novel. The three-year process was lengthy and time consuming, but both Jeani and John expressed the peace of mind and sense of greater good to be well worth the long process.

"With an easement, it is still your land and you get to farm it like all your family members before you," John said. "I like

what I'm doing, and I intend to keep doing it."

As Jeani and John begin to transition their farming operations to the next generation, they find great satisfaction in seeing their son, Damon, and nephew, Darrell, take interest in the operation and seek the next steps in continuing what was started by John's father.

### An Esteemed Award

Throughout the formation of CVFT, Jeani and John worked closely with Dr. Vance Kennedy. His diligence to farmland protection was apparent and respected by all making the award an even greater honor.

"Being recognized by California Farmland Trust, an organization we hold in the highest regard, is a meaningful recognition," John said. "CFT does the work that our region desperately needs, protecting our most important farmland for the long-term. It's an esteemed award and Jeani and I are honored."





## Message from the Chair

### Lori Wolf

Today is November 23, 2021 and I am sitting here pondering the recent events concerning the City of Riverbank and its River Walk Specific Plan proposal. The first mention of this that I was aware of was a front-page article in the Modesto Bee on Sunday, June 20, 2021. The headline screamed, *Riverbank proposes to add 2,400 homes out to McHenry Avenue.*

Individuals seeking assistance on how to fight this proposal contacted Farmland Working Group. We scheduled a quick meeting and since then I have been doing considerable research on this project. The entire proposal can be found on the City of Riverbank website for your reading pleasure, only 175 pages and plenty of colorful maps.

The bottom line is that two or more property owners (or numerous owners per the article) have approached the City and want to develop a new subdivision complete with community center and swimming pool. The bulk of the homes would be low density, meaning larger house sizes and larger yards. Does this not sound exactly like the developments of old? I imagine the developers are excited at the prospect of building a new community in a rural setting, located next to the Stanislaus River. I can picture the advertisements

A total of 993 acres are identified and they are all on prime agricultural land; the very land that Stanislaus County LAFCO is charged to protect. There is no mention of the floodplain issues; there is no men-

tion of farmland mitigation in the River Walk Specific Plan. The developers intend to drill more wells and use groundwater to sustain this project. The proposal paints a bright picture of senior living, using electrical vehicles and carts on the streets, lush green areas and trails, and habitat protections along the Stanislaus River.

By the time this newsletter reaches you there should be a lot of dust up in regards to this project. In 2016, the City of Riverbank identified enough land within its existing Sphere of Influence to support growth for the next ten years.

The objection to this project is about paving over prime farmland for housing. It's an objection to sprawl and the inherent issues it brings. It's about paving over productive, prime farmland when there are hundreds of acres available for housing within Riverbank's SOI (Sphere of Influence).

What it does not address is the need for affordable and low income housing which is our greatest need in Stanislaus County at this time. This project should be rejected by the Riverbank City Planning Department and the City Council.

Prime farmland in Stanislaus County is under constant threat of development. It is up to us to let our elected officials know that we intend to hold them accountable for maintaining our prime agricultural land and green belts between our nine cities and unincorporated communities. Not a single acre of prime farmland should be sacrificed until there is a demonstrable need.

### **FWG Executive Board**

Chair

*Lori Wolf*

Vice Chair

*Chance Carrico*

Treasurer

*Audie Dahlgren*

Secretary

*Jeani Ferrari*

Directors

*Matt Beekman*

*Suzanne Byrd*

*Erica Stewart Gravel*

*Garrad Marsh*

*Steve Stewart*

*Thank You  
To Our Sponsors*

### **Sustaining Sponsors**

The Robert Woolley Fund  
E. & J. Gallo Winery  
Farm Management, Inc.  
Garton Tractor

A donation  
has been made

*In memory of  
Joel Hidahl*

*by  
Farmland Working  
Group Board*

*In Honor of  
Jeani and John Ferrari*

*by  
Audie Dahlgren*

# Please support our important work by making an end-of-year donation

Donations can be sent by mail – PO Box 948, Turlock, CA 95381

or, on-line – [farmlandworkinggroup.org](http://farmlandworkinggroup.org)





# Farmland Working Group

P. O. Box 948 Turlock, CA 95381

 [www.farmlandworkinggroup.org](http://www.farmlandworkinggroup.org)



## DECEMBER IS MEMBERSHIP MONTH

Please Take a Moment to Support Our Work  
with an End of Year Tax Deductible Donation!

Prime farmland in Stanislaus County is under constant threat of development. It is up to us to let our elected officials know that we intend to hold them accountable for maintaining our prime agricultural land and green belts between our nine cities and unincorporated communities.

**Not a single acre of prime farmland should be sacrificed until there is a demonstrable need.**

Lori Wolf — Chair  
Farmland Working Group