



Problems with River Walk, largest Stanislaus - Modesto Bee, The (CA) - May 7, 2023 - page 1

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The city of Riverbank is still early in a process that will be highly consequential for how, where and at what pace cities pursue residential development in Stanislaus County.

A Notice of Preparation for the Environmental Impact Report of the River Walk Specific Plan was completed approximately two years ago. The full Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for River Walk is expected to be completed this spring.

River Walk would expand Riverbank's Sphere of Influence by 1,535 acres and annex nearly 1,000 acres, making it the single largest development project in Stanislaus County in over 20 years. The scale of the project alone should be a cause for concern considering the conversion of some of the best farmland in the world, as well as potential impacts to infrastructure and city finances.

Opinion label

Riverbank residents should understand that they will be responsible for footing part of the bill for infrastructure improvements to accommodate this project and have already started paying for it in their recent sewer rate increase.

One must question the wisdom of building a large-scale residential development in a flood plain. River Walk's location is prone to floods and has flooded three times in the last 75 years. The Farmland Working Group hopes that this legitimate concern is adequately addressed in the upcoming EIR. It is worth mentioning that over 15 years ago, parcels in the annexation area were deemed ineligible for a conservation easement by the Army Corps of Engineers due to concerns regarding potential for flooding.

Stanislaus County Local Agency Formation Commission has raised concerns about the pace at which Riverbank is filing for annexations. LAFCO approved a 1,479-acre annexation for Riverbank in 2016. The intention articulated by the city was to have the annexation accommodate growth for the next 20 years.

Just three years later, Riverbank obtained another 400-acre annexation referred to as Crossroads West. Approving a third annexation that violates Riverbank's own articulated rates of growth in previous annexation requests creates a dangerous precedent, allowing annexations to be based on false premises. This lack of factual basis would erode transparency or accountability at LAFCO.

LAFCOs are an important check to ensure development will not have long-term negative consequences. A key part of this check is a document referred to as a Municipal Service Review. An MSR is "a comprehensive study to determine the adequacy of governmental services being provided by the local agencies under LAFCO jurisdiction." Riverbank's current MSR has not been updated to account for another expansion to the scale of River Walk.

The River Walk project would create a county island by surrounding the unincorporated Park Ridge and River Heights neighborhoods. Such county islands become problematic in providing services to, and are to be avoided.

The River Walk project would directly violate the terms by which LAFCO approved Riverbank's annexation in 2016. In that annexation request, Riverbank explicitly stated a commitment to not developing properties to its west, and designated the land as agricultural buffer. These buffers are spelled out as a plan for "agricultural preservation," which is also referenced in Riverbank's General Plan that prioritized infill development.

There need to be consequences for such potential bait-and-switch tactics. If cities can defy long-established codified LAFCO policies without consequence, all residents in Stanislaus County, urban and rural, will lose an important check against unbridled growth that can have long-term consequences for our agricultural economy that injects billions of dollars into our county annually, providing the ability to fund first responders and to maintain adequate infrastructure.

Fortunately, it is early in the process for the River Walk project. Changes can be made. Farmland Working Group hopes the city of Riverbank reconsiders the River Walk project and keeps its commitments, as articulated in its annexation request in 2016, to prioritize infill development and agricultural buffers to its west. This would be for the direct benefit of Riverbank and county residents while ensuring the maintenance of Stanislaus LAFCO's critical role.

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