

Riverbank Planning Commission votes 4-1 to reject River Walk project

By John Holland, ModBee, August 8, 2026

The Riverbank Planning Commission voted 4-1 Tuesday night against a 2,400-home annexation to the west.

It recommended that the City Council reject the River Walk project, which would stretch the city limit to McHenry Avenue.

Supporters said the development would help ease the housing shortage without burdening city services. Critics said that it would take out prime farmland and that Riverbank has enough vacant home sites within its current boundaries.

Commission Chairman Michael Halterman cast the only vote in favor. Project was opposed by members Natasha Basso, John Dinan, Joan Stewart and Taide Zamora.

None of the five explained his or her position on the dais. The vote came at the end of a nearly four-hour meeting that drew about 200 people.

The council could take up River Walk in about a month, said Joshua Mann, community development director for Riverbank. Approval would send it to the Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission, which rules on annexations in a multi-month process.

River Walk has been debated for five years

River Walk was announced in June 2021 for land owned by several farmers. It would have houses and apartments for a range of ages.

The opponents include other growers who want to keep the agricultural zoning. The critics also said the soil is especially suited to groundwater recharge.

The project is complicated by Measure M on the Nov. 3 city ballot. It would give voters veto power over future City Council approval of most housing west of the current Riverbank limit. This could include actions that carry out the River Walk annexation if it is approved.

The measure would apply to most housing projects beyond the current western limit, about halfway between Coffee and Oakdale roads. It would exempt housing for farmworkers, as well as projects aimed at meeting a state mandate for low-income housing.

River Walk would take up about two-thirds of a



Looking south from the newly widened McHenry Avenue west of Riverbank, Calif., Saturday, Dec. 9, 2023. Andy Alfaro aalfaro@modbee.com

1,522-acre annexation bounded by McHenry, Patterson Road and the Stanislaus River. The rest would be deferred for future development decisions.

Project engineer Dave Romano said Tuesday that the site has been in Riverbank’s long-term growth plan for about 20 years.

“I understand that we need to preserve agriculture,” he said, “but we also need to provide housing ... and we need to do it in a sensible and a thoughtful way.”

The project is opposed by the League of Women Voters of Stanislaus County, board member Vivian Lopez told the commission. She said the Riverbank’s current growth zone “contains land which can be developed for housing, avoiding unnecessary conversion of the prime farmland in the proposed River Walk development area.”

What exactly is planned for River Walk?

The project would have a buffer near the river to protect wildlife, and bicycle and walking paths in other parts. The specific land uses include:

- 1,550 low-density homes, up to eight per acre, on a total of 467 acres
- 702 medium-density homes, up to 16 per acre, on a total of 79 acres
- 180 high-density homes, averaging 18 per

- acre, on a total of 10 acres
- 72 acres of mixed use, where homes are close to retail and other uses
- 69 acres of open space near the river
- 177 acres of parkland and other open space.

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“ The Riverbank Planning Commission voted 4-1 against a 2,400-home annexation to the west... It recommended that the City Council reject the River Walk project, which would stretch the city limit to McHenry Avenue. ”

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FROM THE CHAIR



“I understand that we need to preserve agriculture, but we also need to provide housing ... and we need to do it in a sensible and a thoughtful way,” — Dave Romano, Project Engineer, River Walk Project.

I agree, wholeheartedly.

Putting development on the poorer soils, while directing it away from our food producing land is not only sensible development, it's growing our valley communities “thoughtfully.” Once the food producing land is paved over, it's gone for good. Farmland is a non-renewable resource. Period.

Farmland Working Group has been pointing to the opportunity to house people and produce food for twenty-five years. Our first, and only, bumper sticker has the simple graphic

“Stop Sprawl — No LA.” History is a good teacher. Los Angeles County was the nation's top ag county for forty years.

In the '50's, Los Angeles County abandoned “thoughtful and sensible” land use. By 1960, the county had changed, dramatically. By the 21st century, thoughtless expansion had turned the nation's top ag county into the poster child for Sprawl.

The need to build housing is important. Where to place the housing is equally important in a county that has superior soils, water for irrigation and is the nation's 8th food producing hub.

The soils east of Modesto and Riverbank are inferior soils due to millions of years of clay sliding down from the hillsides and being cut off by Dry Creek. You can see this when you drive east of Modesto and out along Claribel Road.

Measure M and the proposed urban limit for Modesto are designed to direct housing and other urban development away from the productive soils north and west of Modesto and west of Riverbank.

The reason that the urban limit line is Riverbank's current city limit is because the more productive soils are west of Riverbank. This is directing development away from Stanislaus County's important water recharge areas and important, often prime, farmland. It's putting houses on sensible land.

That's how we meet our housing needs and grow food... in a “sensible and thoughtful way” and not repeat the history of Los Angeles County.



The City of Riverbank can accommodate its entire state-mandated target of 3,591 residential units within its existing borders.

The City of Riverbank fails to propose a single alternate site within the city limits. There are 1,783 acres in the Sphere of Influence (outside existing City Limits), for development.

Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission (Stanislaus LAFCO) — The River Walk project conflicted with orderly growth parameters by pushing past previously established long-term development boundaries. Key concerns raised regarding the proposal include:

- **Premature Growth Pace:** Riverbank previously secured a large Sphere of Influence (SOI) expansion in 2016 intended to cover 20 years of projected growth, followed by another 400 acre annexation (Crossroads West) in 2019. Seeking a third massive expansion so soon violated the city's own articulated growth timelines.
- **Conversion of Prime Farmland:** The 1,500 acre Sphere of Influence (SOI) expansion and the 1,000-acre annexation would consume high-quality agricultural soil.
- **Logical Land Use and County Islands:** The footprint creates irregular boundaries and “county islands” by encircling unincorporated residential pockets like Park Ridge and River Heights, complicating municipal service delivery.
- **Infrastructure and Floodplain Pressures:** The project introduces intensive residential construction into a designated floodplain alongside the Stanislaus River, raising

environmental sustainability and fiscal issues.

The Draft and final Environmental Impact Reports (EIR) for the River Walk Specific Plan identify “significant and unavoidable” environmental impacts.

Floodplain Risks and Groundwater Depletion

- **Building in a Floodplain:** The development places intensive residential construction directly inside a designated floodplain adjacent to the Stanislaus River, elevating long-term community flood risks.
- **Paving over Recharge Areas:** Pavement and buildings will seal superior agricultural soils, severely cutting down water infiltration. This limits natural groundwater recharge for local aquifers while triggering heavier stormwater runoff.

Irreversible Farmland Destruction

- **Loss of Prime Farmland Soil:** The project strips away roughly 1,500 acres of productive farmland, these fields provide critical ecological and open-space buffer between Riverbank and north Modesto.

Riparian Habitat Fragmentation

- **Biological Resource Degradation:** Urbanization threatens the sensitive Stanislaus River corridor. Expected edge-effects include vegetation removal, wildlife habitat fragmentation, invasive species spread, and

disruption from increased light and noise pollution along the river margins.

Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

- **Elevated emissions:** Forcing a large-scale development outward results in longer vehicle commutes. The EIR explicitly notes significant unmitigatable spikes in greenhouse gas and emissions and regional air pollution. Dramatically exaggerated by the absence of CO2-storing vegetation and soil.

“The (Riverbank) City Council adopted a General Plan option that calls for development of a “Sustainable Agricultural Strategy intended to conserve agricultural production in the Stanislaus River Watershed...” 2001”

Organizations *Opposed* to the River Walk Project

