

FARMLAND WORKING GROUP

Spring 2011

STRIVING TO PROTECT FOOD, FAMILIES AND FARMLAND



Voters...



Elected Leaders

In the late 1990's citizens, government leaders and elected officials from throughout Stanislaus County met in workshop fashion and crafted an agreement that our leaders published called "Visioning Project 2000." www.stancog.org/pdf/vision.pdf

The leaders wrote: **We will demonstrate our resolve to produce a world class example of DOING IT RIGHT so that Stanislaus County remains blessed with a bounty of fertile land for agriculture. And, we will establish urban limit lines, providing for areas of open space, agriculture, very low density, rural development, or green belts in which urban development cannot occur.**

For more than a decade these strategies have been ignored by leadership. Here is our analysis of positive actions (thumbs up) or kicking the can down the road (thumbs down).

- Visioning Project 2000 generated widespread agreement penned by our leaders as our community guideline.
- 2003 Modesto City Council votes down by 4-3 an urban growth boundary that would limit its General Plan to 44,000 acre. The city limits were approximately 23,000 acres.
- 2003 Modesto voters support 2-1 Measure H which was an advisory vote calling for the Stanislaus County BOS to direct housing into cities in order to protect prime farmland.
- 2004 Newman voters support 2-1 a copy version of Modesto's Measure H for Supervisors to direct housing into cities.
- 2007 Stanislaus County Supervisors adopt Salida Now Initiative as an ordinance bypassing county voters.
- 2008 Stanislaus County Citizens' initiative Stanislaus County Measure E (Stamp Out Sprawl) passes by over 2/3 of voter.

- 2009 Riverbank City Council sites threat from the City of Modesto as reason to include a massive expansion of their General Plan boundaries west to McHenry Avenue, ignoring calls to avoid prime farmland.
- 2010 Patterson City Council approves a massive General Plan that could urbanize thousands of acres of prime farmland.
- 2011 California Supreme Court declines to over rule an appellate court ruling that reaffirms the right and authority of the Stanislaus County Farmland Mitigation Plan that requires 1-1 farmland mitigation protection for housing developments.
- 2011 Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) is considering a requirement that all city requests for annexation must meet the requirements of the County Farmland Mitigation Plan for 1-1 farmland protection.
- 2011 LAFCO delays implementation vote on mitigation at the request of a three month delay by the mayors of cities within Stanislaus County.
- 2004-2011 The mayors of the cities in Stanislaus County have failed to develop or provide any information to the public regarding their plans to "work together" and provide a regional plan for growth and farmland protection.
- No ordinance exists at any government level in the county that insures farmland protection. (Stanislaus County farmland mitigation requires protection of farmland taken for housing developments on a 1-1 basis)
- Recently leaders from Modesto, Salida, and Riverbank have met and are developing areas of agreement that include urban growth boundaries beyond *which urban development cannot occur.*

For over ten years local representatives have kicked the can down the road. No meaningful laws exist that will protect farmland. In September 2010, Farmland Working Group presented an urban growth boundary document to the Modesto City Council Economic Development Committee. To date, Modesto has officially kicked that can down the road...

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

Comment by **Jeani Ferrari, FWG Board**

Turlock is regarded by professional planners as one of the best planned cities in California. That reputation, and the quality of life it affords its citizens, is a result of a commitment to long range planning.

Consistently, Turlock city councils and planning staff have planned for the long term. That long range planning has supported compact, efficient growth. The city's commitment to efficient growth has contributed to Turlock's ability to maintain a safe, financially sound and attractive city.

It will not be the State of California or the County that protects the important farmland surrounding cities. The State and County have fixed borders.

It will have to be the cities that protect the state's most important resource, the world's most productive farmland.

do we not grow. Turlock has consistently restricted residential growth east of SR 99. That has resulted in a compact, efficient and attractive community.

Turlock's (current) General Plan directs future growth to the southeast of Turlock. This area has poorer soils resulting in less productive farmland. The farmland west of SR 99 has better soils as well as highly productive farmland. The farmland west of SR 99 is important as a water recharge area by helping meet Turlock's demand for water pumped from city wells.

Additionally, the southeast is an area that needs repurposing. By directing growth to the southeast, the city has an opportunity to enhance a blighted, underserved area, while re-creating a southern entrance to the city that is attractive. This is a win-win situation.

The current city council is responsible for updating Turlock's General Plan. That plan will be the road map for growth for the next decade and beyond. It will dictate whether Turlock moves forward with efficient, smart growth.

Turlock's current General Plan gives consideration to two important questions pertaining to our urban footprint – where do we grow and where

Most importantly, if the southeast isn't addressed now, and growth is directed to the west, the southeast may forever be a blighted area. The west has no natural boundary to control growth and it will be extremely difficult to interest developers in the southeast after the farmland west of SR 99 is opened to development.

I trust that the mayor and council members vote to direct growth to the southeast. This vote will support Turlock's commitment to long range planning, keep our urban footprint compact and help maintain city services that are efficient and cost-effective. Growth to the southeast will repurpose an underserved and blighted area while also supporting the continued revitalization of the downtown which is in close proximity.

I would suggest that the mayor and council members review Turlock's recent General Plans and understand that projected growth numbers are consistently overstated. I believe staff can confirm that the last General Plan population projection is about 50% over actual growth numbers. Professional planners credit overstated growth projections for premature growth and sprawl. Sprawl is expensive.

I was among the residents who attended the first General Plan Update Community Meeting that attracted a standing room only audience. Each table of eight was asked how they would like to see Turlock in fifty years. Every table identified the protection of farmland as one of its top concerns. The citizens of Turlock are not unique in the desire to protect farmland. Polls, advisory votes and ballot initiatives throughout Stanislaus County support the protection of farmland. (Every poll or vote regarding sprawling growth and farmland protection has exceeded 60% support in the past decade.)

Protecting farmland has everything to do with protecting our number one industry. Without the land, our agricultural industry and culture will disappear. It will not be the State of California or the County that protects the important farmland surrounding Turlock. The State and County have fixed borders. It will be up to the cities in Stanislaus County, as well as those in the surrounding region of the Central Valley, to protect the state's most important non-renewable resource, the agricultural land and high quality irrigation system that makes this farmland land the world's most productive.

The decline in the economy and slow-down in the building industry warrant a realistic plan by our city council. Turlock has no reason to abandon our long range plan for compact growth, protection of our most productive farmland, revitalization of our downtown and repurposing an underserved and blighted southeast area.

—Jeani Ferrari

Public comment--City of Turlock Joint City Council and Planning Commission meeting, February 29, 2011



WE ARE WATCHING...

On February 12, 2011, The Modesto Bee editorial summed up what's happening in our region regarding development and farmland protection. Stanislaus County, the cities and LAFCO function independently and with little consideration for farmland protection.

From The Modesto Bee *Our Views* editorial, February 12, 2011.

There's almost no construction going on, but growth and planning are back on the public agenda. They're on multiple agendas, actually, in a variety of forms:

- There's preliminary talk of the Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission getting involved with mayors in establishing a county-wide farmland preservation policy. They'll meet March 23.
- The Farmland Working Group has drafted a proposed growth management policy strategy that it wants the City Council to put before Modesto voters later this year. It hasn't gotten out of the council's Economic Development Committee.
- Jim Ridenour of Modesto and the mayors of the other eight cities in Stanislaus County continue to meet, but have not been able to produce anything resembling a common growth strategy. We're increasingly skeptical of what they will accomplish because of the turnover in mayors and because individual councils don't want to lose any control of what happens in their cities.
- New county Supervisor Terry Withrow has called for a review of the Salida Community Plan, which

was adopted near the height of the housing boom and is no longer realistic; a review is merited.

- Planning continues for the North County Corridor and the route chosen across north Modesto likely will influence when and where growth occurs.
- Air quality issues will become more serious factors with the phased-in implementation of two state laws — AB 32 and SB 375 — regarding air quality and greenhouse gas emissions.

A myriad of things are driving the current growth discussions. They can be summarized in two ways: people change, times change.

With a two-term limit for the Modesto City Council positions, we're constantly seeing newcomers on the dais, most of whom haven't been active in growth discussions in the past.

The committee has started talking about growth issues, but there will be a learning curve. And they're eager to find any way to promote job growth.

Modesto leaders aren't the only ones scouring for ways to help local businesses and nurture job growth. We agree that it needs to be a high priority, so long as the desire to "just do something" doesn't result in short-sighted land use decisions with bad long-term consequences.

We urge elected officials to make sure they are collecting input from a wide range of residents and that they are getting accurate and up-to-date information from advocates for various perspectives. Several prin-

ciples should guide the debate:

- Protecting our best farmland has to remain a high priority. Agriculture is one of the few sectors of local economy still doing well. And those farms aren't only feeding valley residents but are exporting foods to other countries. Furthermore, the quality of soils does not change. We need to know, respect and protect the areas with the best soil. Growth needs to be directed on to lesser quality soil.
- Water must be a big consideration — its quantity and its quality, above ground and below. For several years, economic development specialists complained that it was hard to attract new businesses to Modesto because of limited sewer and water capacity. Those major improvements are in the works. Another water-related topic: groundwater recharge and whether it is best achieved through old-fashioned flood irrigation of fields and orchards — which can leach uranium and other contaminants into the groundwater — or through direct injection of clean water into the groundwater basins.
- While cities and the county have grown to depend on the sales tax generated at big shopping centers, they have to realize that most of our communities now have a lot of vacant commercial space.

The immediate friction point in growth talks likely will be Kiernan Avenue, currently the northern edge of Modesto's sphere of influence. Some city leaders want to cross Kiernan with business parks. The county, meanwhile, retains control over Kiernan in the Salida area.



The Modesto Bee

Letters from The Modesto Bee

On Farmland and Development

The importance of oil — and of our topsoil

Oil is important, isn't it? We put it in our cars, we use it to heat our homes and build our roads. It's in carpet, roofing material, paint, newsprint, nylon jackets and everything plastic. Oil is everywhere. Oil is ubiquitous, it's like land.

Land? Yes, and like oil, land has degrees of quality. The best oil is in the Middle East. The best land is here in California, in this great valley that stretches from north of Sacramento to Bakersfield. Just add water, stir, sit in the sun to bake and out comes almonds, tomatoes, beans, sweet potatoes, peaches, cherries, berries and that new crop, the one that is just making itself known in the valley as the next big health food — pomegranates.

Good quality land is in short supply and high demand. In 2008, Iran bought more than a million tons of wheat from the United States. If Iran could have gotten it anywhere else, it would have. We're running out of good dirt faster than we're running out of oil. There's an emerging shortage of fertile top soil. Lennart Bage, president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, says, "Now, fertile land with access to water has become a strategic asset." An asset so important nations around the world have begun to curb exports of grain. Only North America, Australia and New Zealand remain as major grain exporters. The war for oil rages in the Middle East and now that Afghanistan is purported to have zillions in essential minerals, that war has taken on a new importance. The next wars will be about water and land — and they will be wars even more fierce and important.

So what are we doing here in this fertile valley with our oil, our land? We are capping our oil wells, paving over those places we get peaches and beans and alfalfa that feeds cows that give us milk.

Each time we approve building a house, like three members of the Board of Supervisors did when they approved a Salida growth plan for up to 4,470 new homes, it's like capping 4,470 new wells. It was a plan the board majority put in place unilaterally by preventing a public vote on the matter.

When the Building Industry Association pursues court action to stop farm land preservation, we cap off a few more producing wells. And when the Modesto City Council lowers building fees by as much as 45 percent, we essentially shut down more productive assets. The Legislature proposes to end the Williamson Act, which provides a tax break for land kept in farming. Let's see, we want to end subsidies for agriculture and provide them for developers.

Actions like those mentioned above often evoke the mantra of "jobs." But they are often construction jobs that will last only six

months, replacing farm jobs that have lasted 150 years. After six months, these so-called good jobs in the building trades go away and what do we get? Could be another empty house or business building.

If Saudi Arabia started capping its wells in order to drive up gas prices, we could install solar panels or buy a hybrid, but we have yet to invent a replacement for food.

It's time to stop planning six months ahead and start thinking about the next 100 years. It's time to stop capping our agricultural wells and get back to the business of supporting the food supply, where jobs are found in top soil and a hungry world waits for what we grow.

Ed Bearden

Reprint from April 18, 2011

From Foods to Forbes

A lively debate arose during a recent Modesto Institute for Continued Learning discussion. The question: Why is Modesto consistently ranked by Forbes Magazine as one of the worst cities in the U.S.?

Here is my take: During my professional years, I was privileged to travel to many cities and absorb the allure (or non-allure) they provided. Every metropolis that impressed me invariably had a robust and active downtown or city center. Life centered on tall buildings. Streets were lined with shops and restaurants. A short walk fulfilled most needs, while taxis and buses were available for longer jaunts.

Modesto and most Central Valley cities are trapped in cheap-land syndrome. It is easier to build a shopping center on a farm miles from population centers than to concentrate business on developed plots in the city center.

A necessary ingredient for a vibrant downtown is people. When people live downtown, they work, eat, shop, and play downtown. Restaurants open. Music thrives. City officials spruce up the streets. More people arrive and the buildings get higher. When downtown residential development was mentioned to The Bee's editorial staff, the comment was, "It's been tried but it never pencils out."

Well, let's hope that some entrepreneurial spirit arrives in town with a sharper pencil and shakes up the status quo. Better yet, the city leaders should fan out on a quest for such an entity. In the meantime, we have Stockton and Merced to insulate us from dead last on Forbes' list.

Gene Richards—Visiting Editor

Reprint from February 26, 2011

Message from Chance Carrico, FWG Director

California's Central Valley remains an agricultural treasure of natural resources. Superior soils, a Mediterranean climate and a water distribution by canals have made our region a precious reserve for growing a wide variety of healthy foods. Preserving this treasure in our own backyard and practicing smart growth benefits American food independence, promotes local economies and preserves our heritage.

Growth happens; populations expand, businesses create new markets, and consumer wants push for more space and variety. In a land of the best farmland in the world, community inspired smart growth is needed to manage demands in a complex world. To manage smartly, we need to build networks of people that share goals and a unified vision. Approaches to land management need to respect land rights and community values, and hold to an ideal of greater expectations for our region.

Smart growth is about building up, not out, and using land more efficiently. It is about not building on our superior soils. We need to set priorities to preserve rich agricultural land by promoting our agricultural industry that fits our regions unique capabilities.

Development practices of the past rely on building out, sprawling over

land without consideration of soil qualities or water recharge capabilities. The spread of communities over greater tracks of land create more long term costs for maintenance of infrastructure (water, sewer, storm drains) as well as ongoing costs for police and fire protection. Widespread communities generate costly transportation systems that are difficult to maintain and time consuming to use.

We can create smarter policies that include full expected costs of development. We can create systems for greater down payment for infrastructure and avoid 'pay as you go' systems that leave communities full of empty foreclosed homes when the economy sours. The key difference between smart growth and simple development is easy to explain. Smart growth is progress moving forward smartly. Simple development is turning any land into changed land. I urge you to go smart for smart growth.

Development practices of the past rely on building out, sprawling over land without consideration of soil qualities or water recharge capabilities.

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May-November — 16th St. between H & I Sts.

www.modestocfm.com

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www.turlockmarket.org

FARMLAND WORKING GROUP

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 www.farmlandworkinggroup.org

Earth Day

April 16, 2011
Modesto, CA



We need your support — Become a member today!
Farmland Protection and Smart Growth Advocacy is OUR MISSION!

Message and Lesson from Japan

In 1995, 18-year-old exchange student Yoko Okamoto lived with us on the West Side. Yoko learned about the vast richness of our area's agricultural prominence during her stay. She was one of a group of students visiting from Japan that summer.

Now married with two daughters, she responded recently via e-mail from Osaka that her family was safe. Yoko asked that we continue to pray for the people of Japan. There had been concerns about the food supply and the possibility of contaminated crops. Apparently, the United States has stopped crop and milk imports from Japan. How much more can we produce ourselves?

When my wife and I moved to Newman in 1991, we understood how the Central Valley landscape was dominated by rich and vibrant crops, orchards and dairy farms. Stanislaus County had a "right to farm" ordinance and the vision was to protect prime farmland. I thought to myself how we live in an American breadbasket. Our connection with Yoko in Japan retooled my thinking on how much smaller our enormous ag industry is becoming. Preservation of our prime farmland is a no-brainer.

E. Timothy Parker

The Modesto Bee, reprint from March 26, 2011

Parker is a former member of the Newman City Council and serves on the Farmland Working Group Board