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Even critics of a future Stanislaus County **growth initiative** praise the unprecedented effort by its nine mayors.

But the road to a countywide vote on containing sprawl has been rocky, and another agency with power over cities' **growth** could be losing patience.

The Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission, which rules on annexations, helped spur the mayors into action more than a year ago, and may provide more "motivation" if some cities keep dragging feet, its new chairman said.

The nine mayors want all voters to weigh in on urban boundaries beyond which cities could not grow before 2050. Each city **is** tasked with proposing its own lines on a map, for a ballot sometime this year or next.

Leaders in seven cities complied. Patterson and Oakdale initially balked but are expected to revisit the issue.

Meanwhile, some leaders in the two reluctant cities object to the process while other **growth** experts question whether the strategy would help preserve the best farmland on the planet -- or guarantee sprawl.

CRITICS USE STUDY AS AMMO

Armed with a new study by the University of California at Davis, the American Farmland Trust concluded that the proposed maps would not change how the cities have planned to grow at all.

And some cities have criticized others. For example, a resolution unanimously passed by Modesto City Council members formally asks other cities to "justify and explain" why they want to grow so much.

The UC Davis study found that Stanislaus cities on average are asking for three times more land than they'll really need by 2050. Some far exceed that average. For example, a map initially contemplated for Patterson would provide 782 percent of the acreage required to reasonably accommodate its projected population, the study found.

"This at the very least raises some serious questions," said Ed Thompson, state director for the American Farmland Trust. "I think there **is** a pretty strong case for reconsidering."

In its winter newsletter, the nonprofit Farmland Working Group decried the Stanislaus **initiative** for giving only lip service to saving farms. "Passage would assure sprawl over our most productive soils," the newsletter reads.

HALF OF AREAS **IS** PRIME SOIL

The UC Davis analysis found that of **growth** areas mulled by the nine cities, 47 percent **is** classified as prime soil, meaning highest quality for crops.

Most cities used their existing general plans, which guide **growth**, when approaching the task of drawing new boundaries. That sounds like status quo, not aggressively saving farms, some say.

"I'm skeptical about proposing such tremendous expansion of cities and calling it ag preservation," said Jim DeMartini, a grower and county supervisor.

Several mayors said he apologized Wednesday for criticizing them in media reports. In a Friday interview, DeMartini said he was wrong to accuse mayors of not caring about agriculture, by far the county's No. 1 economic engine.

"Their heart **is** in the right place," he said. "At least they're talking, and a dialogue **is** better than no dialogue. But when they're moving **growth** areas miles out of town -- so far that they'll never get there by 2050 -- I'm not sure what they've accomplished."

Patterson Councilwoman Annette Smith said it's a lousy idea for nine mayors to privately plot moves that could become public policy. She also objects to the concept that West Side cities' destiny could be subject to votes by others with larger populations, and has little respect for how most cities proposed boundaries.

"(Modesto) can't take their general plan, add Salida and call that ag preservation," Smith said. "That's a fancy name that doesn't match the map."

Actually, Modesto's general plan for years has included Salida, whose residents in the past have resisted being absorbed by that city. Turlock's proposed map includes the unincorporated -- and independent -- towns of Keyes and Denair.

OAKDALE MAYOR WAS KIDDING

Oakdale Mayor Pat Paul acknowledged playing games with the huge map she initially proposed, saying preposterous lines were meant to protest a process without public input.

"I did that because I was so annoyed. They're not going to threaten me," said Paul, whose lines show Oakdale growing much larger than Modesto. "I was just being provocative. I wanted to force people to step up and say, 'Wait, we haven't heard of this.' Now they'll be able to weigh in."

Turlock already has far more undeveloped land within its limits, 18,369 acres, than the other cities, according to the university study, and proposes a concentric boundary another mile out. Mayor John Lazar said that would reduce the chance of county leaders approving industrial or commercial projects just outside Turlock.

He said the mayors met with new county Chief Executive Officer Monica Nino and are optimistic about future tax-sharing deals.

TALKING ABOUT 'RIGHT THINGS'

Several people watching the **initiative** process, including critics, commend the mayors for lurching in the right direction. They include Denny Jackman, a former Modesto councilman and longtime controlled-**growth** advocate.

Thompson, of the American Farmland Trust, said, "I think the county **is** poised to be the leader in the San Joaquin Valley."

"They're talking about the right things," he said, even if proposed maps are ill-conceived.

Just before Modesto leaders unanimously proposed **growth** areas on Jan. 24, outgoing Mayor Jim Ridenour ranted that "this county has never done any planning." He **is** credited for spearheading the mayors' **initiative**.

"We've got to get together and quit fighting," he said that night.

Modesto Mayor-elect Garrad Marsh said he's anxious to join the mayors' group.

The mayors' next move -- scheduling a countywide vote, or waiting for Oakdale and Patterson -- **is** not known. They're expected to regroup in April.

Meanwhile, Waterford Mayor Charlie Goeken, who **is** LAFCo's new chairman, wants that panel to consider a new rule that could nudge laggards.

He envisions a policy requiring mitigation, or permanently preserving so much farmland elsewhere for each acre lost to development, for cities without voter-approved **growth** boundaries.

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PUSHING THE LIMITS

A university analysis of **growth** boundaries contemplated by Stanislaus County's nine cities found:

* The cities have 11,622 acres of undeveloped land within current limits.

* Almost half the area eyed for expansion **is** prime farmland.

Proposed **growth** areas would consume 24 percent of the county's prime farmland.

* About 403,818 people live in the nine cities. Proposed **growth** areas could accommodate an additional 1.9 million.

* Urbanizing those **growth** areas could take as long as 250 years, while the **initiative** purports to guide **growth** for 38 years.

* With median density targets, the cities reasonably could add 42,000 acres to meet population **growth** by 2050. Their initial maps ask for 85,246 acres more than they need, or about three times more than they're likely to fill.

SIZE IN ACRES

City: Ceres

2010: 5,018

2050: 13, 400

Potential **Growth**: 167%

City: Hughson

2010: 1,239

2050: 2,234

Potential **Growth**: 80%

City: Modesto

2010: 23,834

2050: 41,242

Potential **Growth**: 73%

City: Newman

2010: 1,397

2050: 11,000

Potential **Growth**: 687%

City: Oakdale

2010: 3,894

2050: 36,598

Potential **Growth**: 840%

City: Patterson

2010: 3,993

2050: 11,794

Potential **Growth:** 195%

City: Riverbank

2010: 2,663

2050: 6,010

Potential **Growth:** 126%

City: Turlock

2010: 10,701

2050: 14,581

Potential **Growth:** 36%

City: Waterford

2010: 1,560

2050: 4,458

Potential **Growth:** 186%

Totals

2010: 54,299

2050: 139,827

Potential **Growth:** 158%

Notes: Most cities have yet to pinpoint **growth** areas for the ballot. This draft relies largely on each city's general plan, which most are using as a starting point. Several are being refined by respective agencies.

Sources: City planning documents

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

STAPLEYGSTAPLEY@MODBEE.COM, GARTH. "GROWTH INITIATIVE IS LAUDEDMAYORS EARN KUDOS FOR EFFORT TO IDENTIFY CLEAR BOUNDARIES." *Modesto Bee, The (CA)*, ALL ed., sec. A, 12 Feb. 2012, p. A1. *NewsBank: Access World News*, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=FD4FECC962F43B889B0A2A6759261F3&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/ft%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/13CE7F7C6 Accessed 23 May 2023.

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