



City tackles farmland - Modesto Bee, The (CA) - January 5, 2014 - page 1A

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After spending a few hours at their last meeting listening to farmers, residents and business interests talk about the **city's** proposal to set aside hundreds of acres of prime **farmland** for **development**, Modesto **City** Council members will weigh in Tuesday with their ideas.

The **city** is amending the traffic and land use elements of its general plan, which serves as a blueprint for how Modesto will grow and develop. Council members took their first look at the proposed changes Dec. 3 and are expected to give **city** staff their ideas at Tuesday's council meeting before deciding Jan. 28 on whether to move forward with the amendment.

Mayor Garrad Marsh said the meeting is an opportunity for council members to weigh in on the general plan, but members of the public who did not speak at the Dec. 3 meeting can speak Tuesday.

The general plan is not the only growth issue the council will consider Tuesday. **City** staff is asking council members to rescind the council's Aug. 7 vote to place a residential urban growth boundary before the voters in June.

City staff wants that vote to take place in November 2015, so the boundary can be evaluated with the general plan amendment and to provide time to review whether two longstanding **city** growth measures - Measures A and M - should continue in light of the residential growth boundary. The measures require advisory votes from residents before the **city** extends sewer services.

The proposal to designate hundreds of acres of prime **farmland** west of Highway 99 in an area known as Wood Colony for industrial and commercial **development** has been the most controversial part of the general plan amendment. The colony was founded by Old German Baptist Brethren and other settlers more than a century ago and has some of the richest, most productive **farmland** in the state.

The colony is bounded roughly by Highway 99 to the east, Murphy/Bacon Road to the north, Maze Boulevard to the south and North Gates Road to the west. The **city** has amended its boundaries for industrial **development** since the council's Dec. 3 meeting, by exempting 170 acres from **development** along Beckwith Road, up from 25 acres.

That's not likely to appease Wood Colony residents, who say they have a unique community characterized by civic involvement, neighbors looking after neighbors, and strong churches and schools.

"I get what they are trying to do, 'let's negotiate,' " said Jake Wenger, a Wood Colony farmer and Modesto Irrigation District board member. "But this is like saying, 'I'm confiscating your car. But I'll let you drive it every Tuesday. Do we have a deal?' No we don't have a deal. It's my car."

Proponents of designating the Wood Colony land for **development** say it's a critical step if Modesto is going to be successful in its efforts to lure business parks, manufacturers and other commercial **development** in the coming decades and make a dent in the region's chronically high unemployment rate. Proponents say the colony's proximity to Highways 99 and 132 make it ideal for **development**.

Wood Colony residents say they understand the need for more jobs, but say their prime **farmland** is not the place for it. They suggest the **city** look at infill projects or east of Modesto, where the soil is of a lesser quality and which could be connected to Highway 99 by an expressway.

The **city** has designated hundreds of acres in Wood Colony for **development** for about 20 years, though none of that land has been developed. The general plan amendment redraws the boundaries for **development** west of Highway 99. The colony is outside of **city** limits. In order for the land to be developed, a landowner would have to want to develop his land or sell it to a developer. The **city** would need to get permission from a growth-regulating agency to annex the land.

The amendment's other highlights include dropping Salida from the **city's** general plan. That would end any attempts by the **city** to annex the community of about 13,700 residents northwest of Modesto. Marsh has faced strong opposition from Salida residents for more than a year as he has advocated exploring annexation.

The **City** Council will meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the basement chamber of 10th Street Place, 1010 10th St.

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