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Farmers express worries over loss of ag land to city

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The Merced County Farm Bureau has voiced concerns about the possible loss of ag land stemming from the city's general plan draft environmental impact report.

The bureau's worries were contained in a letter addressed to the mayor at a joint City Council and Planning Commission study session last week.

"Our concern is they will continue to annex land into the city that is valuable ag land," Amanda Carvajal, executive director of the Farm Bureau, said Wednesday.

She said the city is surrounded by valuable ag land. "We want to make sure -- when these developers come in, generally speaking, they're from out of town," she explained. "They take land and they develop it, but it's a one-time investment. They invest in the community once."

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She said she wants some sign of preservation for the agricultural industry and hopes the city's plans for ag land are "proper."

She added the city should take a look at Stanislaus County's efforts in mitigating the loss of farmland to residential land.

She said that county's plan is "for every one acre of land taken out and put into residential only, another acre would have to be put into easement to protect agriculture."

At the meeting, Councilman John Carlisle agreed there's a need to protect ag land.

Meanwhile, Mayor Bill Spriggs asserted the plan is in place to manage growth, but that growth can't occur without moving onto agricultural land. Spriggs said most growth will occur to the north, on "ag land that isn't the best in the world."

"The key to preserve ag land is to have high density or more houses per acre," he said. "We are surrounded by ag land, and it is impossible to grow without growing onto ag land."

The old general plan needs to be updated to reflect the growth, land development and infrastructure changes the city has gone through the past few years. The Merced Vision 2030 General Plan seeks to turn Merced into a city with an improved economy, various transportation choices and adequate public services by 2030.

Like most development projects, the state requires that the plan undergoes the California Environmental Quality Act process and considers the impacts of the plan, said Kim Espinosa, city planning manager.

She acknowledged that farmland will be lost. "They want a program where the city agrees for every acre of farmland lost, that we somehow mitigate for that loss. For example, we would have a developer who wants to develop 20 acres of ag land and buy 20 acres of agricultural easement," explained Espinosa.

In this scenario, she said if you're developing 20 acres of prime ag land in the county, another 20 acres of ag land is protected somewhere else.

She said a farmer gives up his right to develop his land, and by selling the developers an easement, the farmer agrees to keep farming his property for a period of time (usually 40 to 100 years).

"That's how the developer is able to say 'I'm mitigating for the loss of this farmland for a certain period of time,'" she explained.

Espinosa said the city supports a countywide effort to preserve ag land.

Consultants are working on responses to the 25 state, local agencies and citizens' comments received on the draft environmental impact report, she said. Then, there should be public hearings in April for the Planning Commission and in June for the City Council.

Final adoption of the plan will occur sometime next year.

Reporter Ameera Butt can be reached at (209) 385-2477 or abutt@mercedsun-star.com.

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