

Farmland Working Group

25 YEARS ANNIVERSARY

If Stanislaus County wants to remain a top ag producer, it must protect prime farmland | Opinion

By Jeani Ferrari

The Modesto Bee - June 15, 2024

Sixty years ago, in 1963, the California Legislature created the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), an important state agency which regulates when and where cities can expand their borders in the state's 58 counties. LAFCOs must consider the effect that any proposal will produce on existing agricultural lands. By guiding development toward vacant urban land, LAFCO assists with the preservation of our valuable agricultural resources while addressing urban infill.



Looking east from McHenry Avenue toward the city of Riverbank at the proposed River Walk housing development. Photographed west of Riverbank, Calif., Saturday, Dec. 9, 2023. ANDY ALFARO aalfaro@modbee.com

In 2016, Stanislaus LAFCO granted Riverbank a 1,479-acre annexation and Sphere of Influence expansion intended to accommodate the city's growth for the next 20 years. Currently, the City of Riverbank is requesting yet another border expansion. The majority of the newly proposed 1,535-acre Sphere of Influence expansion is to accommodate River Walk, a proposed senior living development with 2,400–2,800 residences. This raises serious concerns about increased traffic and how it can possibly be mitigated on McHenry, Coffee and Patterson roads.

One of LAFCO's main charges, as put forth by the legislature, is to protect and promote agriculture. The majority of Riverbank's proposed 1,535-acre Sphere of Influence expansion area is considered prime farmland.

Before granting any expansion to its borders, Stanislaus LAFCO is requiring Riverbank to identify a range of alternatives that focus on lands within the Sphere of Influence on non-prime lands. LAFCO cites ample acres in the city's 2016 expansion, within city limits, to accommodate housing. This is demonstrated in Riverbank's Housing Element inventory of 6,712 potential housing units.

LAFCO's Sphere of Influence states that boundaries "shall, to the extent possible, maintain a separation between existing communities to protect open space and agricultural lands and the identity of an individual community." Riverbank's proposed expansion extends along the Stanislaus River to McHenry Avenue, adjacent to development in the unincorporated Del Rio community area. If the county's community plan and Riverbank's proposed expansion were developed to their extents, no separation of communities or agricultural land would remain north of Patterson and Ladd Roads.

“In 2016, Stanislaus LAFCO granted Riverbank a 1,479-acre annexation and Sphere of Influence expansion intended to accommodate the city's growth for the next 20 years.”

The proposed River Walk project is adjacent to the Stanislaus River, a natural resource that provides open space, wildlife habitat and aquifer restoration. The River Walk project hopscoches over Riverbank's current Sphere of Influence in order to locate on a scenic river. But the land along the river is a flood plain, and Riverbank has made no reference to the structural soundness of the levees that were constructed over 70 years ago, nor is there reference to the impacts of climate change on the river flow. Additionally, 150 acres of the project are riparian habitat.

If Stanislaus County intends to remain one of America's top 10 ag producing counties, it must protect its prime farmland. If our

“ Stanislaus County's formal response to the proposed River Walk project states, “It's premature and does not maintain a logical land-use pattern.” ”

cities accommodate growth by incrementally expanding their borders, Stanislaus County is destined to follow the path of Los Angeles County — it will become a commuter county with traffic congestion, crime, unaffordable housing and all the costs associated with unsustainable growth (with the caveat that Los Angeles County was the nation's most productive agricultural county for 45 years, until 1955).

Each of the county's nine cities needs to accommodate growth by building up, repurposing underutilized and blighted areas, infilling and putting development on the poorest soils. Stanislaus County already has plans to develop 88,558 acres within its cities and their general plans. There are hundreds of acres available for housing within Riverbank's Sphere of Influence.

Stanislaus County's formal response to the proposed River Walk project states, “It's premature and does not maintain a logical land-use pattern.”

Simply stated, Riverbank lacks a justifiable reason to further expand its borders.

Jeani Ferrari is chairperson of Farmland Working Group. Members of the Farmland Working Group, Stanislaus Audubon Society, League of Women Voters, Stanislaus, Friends of the Swainson's Hawk, Sierra Club, Yokuts Group and Voters for Farmland also contributed to this piece.

What is LAFCO?

Stanislaus LAFCO is the most powerful agency in the county. Period.

Each of California's 58 counties has a LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission). The name doesn't reflect the important role of the commission. LAFCO was created by the State Legislature in 1963 in response to rapid growth and sporadic formation of cities in California in the years following World War II. Its broad goals are to preserve agricultural and open space lands, and to discourage urban sprawl.

Stanislaus LAFCO is composed of two county supervisors selected by the Board of Supervisors; two city council members selected by a City Selection Committee; and one public member selected by the other four members of the Commission. There is an alternate for each category - city, county, and

public. The current commissioners are mayors Amy Bublak and Richard O'Brien, city members; Supervisors Terry Withrow and Vito Chiesa, county members, and public member, Ken Lane. Commission members serve four-year terms.

Stanislaus LAFCO members control how, when and where Stanislaus County's nine cities expand their borders. Over time, LAFCO's city members have generally been in support of city's requests for border expansion. The county-members have generally voted in favor of protecting farmland. The vote of the public member has been mixed.

When we vote for mayor, council member or supervisor, we're voting for an elected official who, one day, could be a LAFCO member. Your vote is important.

LAFCO members are appointed to represent the interests of the public as a whole and the broad goals of preserving agricultural and open space lands and discouraging urban sprawl.

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We're Speaking Out...

Stanislaus LAFCO meeting – Oct. 23, 2024

Commissioners and staff –

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I'm Jeani Ferrari, a life-long resident of Stanislaus County and resident of the community of Turlock for fifty-eight years. I'm speaking as a Founding Director of Farmland Working Group; the organization has been supporting sustainable growth and opposing poor land use proposals for twenty-five years. We've had some successes.

Nothing will impact the future of this county, or the future of its resident's quality of life, more than the votes by Stanislaus LAFCO commissioners. That's huge. Long after my life, and your lives, the decisions that you make as LAFCO commissioners will determine if this county, rich in productive agricultural land and open spaces, will remain an ag-producing region and have sustainable cities.

Some of our cities continue standing on the edges of their borders to look for housing opportunities. The nine cities in our county need to practice infill, building up, and repurposing blighted areas... first. And, importantly, we as a county, must commit to building on the poorest soils. Less than 3% of the world's surface can produce food and fiber. It makes no sense to build on our best soils while overlooking the poorest soils and least productive land.

Stanislaus LAFCO needs to do what it was created to do – promote sustainable urban growth and protect farmland and open space. To do that, the commissioners will need to say "No" to poor land use proposals.

Farmland Working Group submitted comments on the City of Riverbank's River Walk Environmental Impact Report. The project fails to meet the requirements of sustainable growth and the protection of farmland and open space. The residents of Stanislaus County should always be able to look to the leadership of Stanislaus LAFCO commissioners. Citizens shouldn't be required to become land use agents by putting Urban Limit initiatives on the ballot. The River Walk is opposed by League of Women Voters, Stanislaus County, Voters for Farmland, Audubon Society, Stanislaus County, Sierra Club, Yokuts Chapter, and 1,542 residents of Riverbank who signed the proposed Urban Limit initiative for Riverbank. Farmland Working Group opposes the River Walk Project.

Stanislaus County's formal response to the proposed River Walk project, "It is premature and does not maintain a logical land use pattern."

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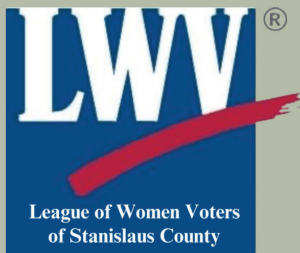
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Organizations *Opposed* to the River Walk Project



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