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## OPINION AND COMMENTARY

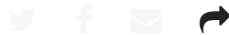
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OPINION COLUMNS & BLOGS

## *How to boost Stanislaus County housing and protect farms at the same time*

BY MATT BEEKMAN AND JEANI FERRARI

UPDATED DECEMBER 09, 2020 5:19 PM





An artist rendering shows how the area around Ninth and J streets could be transformed into dense housing and businesses near the upcoming station for Altamont Corridor Express trains. It was among the ideas presented at a Friday, Oct. 4, 2019, meeting on the downtown master plan being drafted for Modesto, Calif. OPTICOS DESIGN

Recent election results will lead to significant turnover of leadership in Stanislaus County. Most cities here are cash-strapped. We are just at the beginning of a pension crisis that will be a financial drain on our cities for the foreseeable future.

There is a direct correlation with the fiscal health of a city and land-use decisions. Low-density residential development on newly converted farmland does not generate adequate revenue to mitigate its full impact on city services and infrastructure. By comparison, agricultural land, commercial/industrial property, and residential infill that is dense, transit-oriented, and utilizes existing infrastructure typically will generate adequate revenue for corresponding municipal services and infrastructure requirements.

Patterson's recent move to switch to building housing in an already designated successful industrial area is unfortunate because it will have an adverse impact financially on the city and our county. The lack of transparency and contracted timeline in which the Planning Commission and City Council conducted themselves right before an election is concerning in and of itself; the lack of acknowledgment of the fiscal impact of their decision will be even more consequential.

A recent webinar, “From Wall Street to Main Street,” addressed how the pandemic is giving Modesto an opportunity to attract new residents as movement out of more expensive regions accelerates. The article alluded to Bay Area workers looking for affordable housing and a rural lifestyle, and to escape traffic congestion, crime and the high cost of living. For this discussion to be framed only as an “opportunity” gives no consideration to the negative ramifications that come with rapid residential growth.

OPINION

For decades, many of our elected officials in Stanislaus County have kicked the can down the road regarding protecting our world-class farmland that supports our world-class agricultural economy.

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San Joaquin County has permanently secured 2,300 acres of productive farmland in conservation easements. Yolo County has permanently secured over 11,000 acres with a 2:1 farmland mitigation policy; it has a thriving economy and viable housing options. Merced County has over 10,000 acres of farm and grazing land in conservation easements. Stanislaus County, with some of the world’s best soils and a world-class agricultural infrastructure, has only 300 acres of productive farmland secured.

Our elected officials must place greater emphasis on where we can infill and repurpose, and where can we build up, rather than out. This will be a financial benefit to our cities and also result in a better diversity of housing to meet consumer demand while staying in a city’s current footprint.

Modesto’s Downtown Master Plan is an excellent example of infill development that can provide more affordable housing, leverage existing infrastructure, and provide quality of life features like walking paths and proximity to parks and restaurants as

well as mass transit. Dense, transit-oriented development is much more likely to generate adequate revenue for the city services and infrastructure it will require.

As our elected leaders plan for our future, the conversation must also include practical Urban Limit Lines. Twelve counties and forty-eight cities in the Bay Area have Urban Limit Lines to protect farmland and important resources.

Stanislaus County has a gross farm income between \$3 billion and \$4 billion annually. That doesn't represent the total economic output, which is over \$7 billion. Preserving our farmland preserves our tax base, preserves a world class job generator, preserves a significant economic multiplier, preserves our ability to recharge our aquifers, and preserves our ability to feed our population and much of the nation.

Redeveloped, rejuvenated communities existing amid world-class agricultural land is an achievable goal. Our elected officials need to understand that this is fiscally imperative, now and for the future.

*Matt Beekman and Jeani Ferrari are members of the advocacy committee of Turlock-based Farmland Working Group.*

This story was originally published December 8, 2020, 5:55 AM.

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