

URBAN CITIZENS — KEY TO FARMLAND PRESERVATION

Rudy Platzek

The future for farmland here in the three county northern San Joaquin Valley lies in the hands of its urban citizens.

This is so because the urban public comprises more than 90% of the total population of the region. By their sheer numbers and voting power, it will be up to the people of the region's cities, towns and hamlets to decide how their urban settlement will continue to grow, where they will grow and whether they will have stabilized urban edges, beyond which is permanently protected farmland and open space.

Today, three quarters of California voters support the idea of setting up urban boundaries to stop sprawl and preserve agricultural land and open space.

Elsewhere in California, urban voters are beginning to get with it. In a growing trend, voters in 19 San Francisco Bay Area cities already have established urban growth boundaries to control sprawl and protect their rural areas from development. Such tight growth boundaries around urban areas limit outward expansion, redirecting development to planned compact growth areas and infill sites. **In the November 2000 local elections, voters throughout the state established or strengthened their urban growth boundaries and approved growth management, open space and farmland protection measures, as demonstrated by the following nearby examples:**

- Alameda County. Voters approved drawing tight urban limit lines around Dublin, Pleasanton, Livermore, Sunol and Castro Valley.
- City of San Jose. The election strengthened the city-established urban growth boundary by requiring voter approval to any changes to the boundary.
- City of Sonoma. An urban growth boundary at the city's current sphere of influence won voter approval.
- City of Rohnert Park. Voters approved an urban limit line drawn by the City Council during the general plan adoption process.
- City of Tracy. A citizen-initiated measure to cut the annual number of housing permits in half won voter approval.
- City of Davis. A parcel tax to fund an open space and farmland acquisition program received the necessary two-thirds voter approval.

These voters understand that unless they say no to continuing sprawl and say yes to better planning, their community's quality of life will be paved over for good. If the urban citizens of our region do not want to repeat the same mistakes of the now-paved-over Santa Clara Valley and Los Angeles, they will need to speak resoundingly for sprawl control through their advocacy and votes for urban growth boundaries, planning for compact growth and farmland protection.

Through our ongoing public education and outreach campaign, Farmland Working Group (FWG) members have been reaching out to urban audiences to build support for smart urban growth and farmland protection in the following ways:

Schools and Youth Programs. FWG members have taught 14 civics and economics classes involving every senior student at Ceres High School. These students were informed of the uniqueness of the Central Valley for diverse agriculture, the importance of continuing, vibrant agriculture for their food security, economic, and quality of life futures, and their need to make informed choices to support farmland protection when they soon become eligible to vote.

Media. FWG has provided knowledgeable spokespeople for TV programs on Cable 1 and Channel 14 to inform their viewers of current and potential farmland loss issues, as well as opportunities for farmland protection. Also, the Business Journal published the recent FWG newsletter article "The Big Picture – A Mega-City in Our Region" in a recent issue. This publication reaches many businesses in the northern San Joaquin Valley.

Conservation Easement Forum. On February 7th FWG, together with the American Farmland Trust, Farm Bureau and CWA held a well-attended public forum for farmers at the Stanislaus Ag Center. Several speakers informed these farmers of the opportunities to voluntarily sell or donate conservation easements on their farmland in return for compensation or tax relief.

Service Organizations and Clubs. FWG members have delivered a message for farmland protection at the meetings of service organizations and clubs in our area and reached over 1000 people.

The FWG will continue to work with our urban citizens to build their support, to control sprawl and protect farmland.

LOCAL ACTIVIST GROUP FORMS IN OAKDALE

Friends of Oakdale is a local activist group which originally came together in the fall of 2000 to oppose Oakdale's annexation of one thousand acres north of the city. This development called for 2000 homes and eighty acres of big box store commercial development to be built on what is now farm and rangeland. We feared that this development would have led to more overcrowding in schools, unbearable traffic problems, significant over use of our waste treatment plant, and a decrease in the city's character and citizens' civic involvement as the town sprawled into open space becoming just another faceless commuter rest stop.

In the space of three weeks nearly 1000 signatures were gathered and several front-page articles told our story in local and regional newspapers. Our most effective lobbying tool was passing out flyers which implored concerned citizens to call city council members and voice their concerns about proposed annexation. City council members reported that they received hundreds of calls. At the October 2 council meeting with channel 10 and 3 covering the night's events members of Friends of Oakdale presented several concise arguments against this development. The proposed development was narrowly defeated to the cheers of three hundred plus people in attendance. In an October 4 Modesto Bee editorial it was stated that "annexation opponents efficiently pulled together and were clear in their message that they wanted the pace of

growth to be moderate enough to ensure that the character of Oakdale not be threatened. The council majority did well to support the stand."

The mission of the Friends of Oakdale is to help the town to keep a balance between its city planning, farming heritage and natural habitats. We support smart growth city planning, downtown revitalization, urban growth limits, and community building activities. Our latest project has been the creation of a community garden where local volunteers grow and distribute vegetables and flowers to those in need through a local community sharing group. As well, a local high school art class commissioned by Friends of Oakdale has just completed painting a 90-foot long mural bordering the garden depicting the city of Oakdale in balance with surrounding farmland and natural environments. This project was funded by the Oakdale Foundation for the Arts.

The pressure from bay area commuters mixed with depressed farm prices will surely create another Los Angeles basin here in our midst unless citizens get involved in local decision making. Don't wait three weeks before a proposed annexation to create a group in your town. Organize now! Immediate local involvement is our best chance at retaining the character of our towns and the farming and natural spaces between them.

Farmland Working Group Needs Your Support

FWG depends on contributions from individuals to keep our non-profit organization active and vital. Your support keeps us going!

Please take a moment to join us and be part of the solution in protecting our agricultural heritage and promoting Smart Growth in our region.

Our active members meet monthly and regularly make presentations to service organizations, clubs and classrooms. For information contact Jeani Ferrari (209) 634-4495.

Yes, I want to support FWG. **Here is my tax deductible contribution.**

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The Farmland Working is a broad range of individuals committed to preserving the agricultural foundation of our region and promoting Smart Growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action

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Time to Rise Up Against Sprawl

Bruce Jones

“Growth must pay its way.” How controversial can that declaration be ?

Enough to start a minidebate, which is not a bad thing. I was surprised by a recent Bee article on that basic concept by Modesto City Councilman Bruce Frohman, who revealed that some council members do not understand how sprawling growth does not pay for its cumulative impact on urban services and life quality.

Well, folks, welcome to Land Use Planning 101a. Documentation of the high social, economic and environmental cost of sprawl has been thorough and respected since the 1970s. The principle is so firmly accepted by researchers that I am dismayed that some local decision-makers don't grasp it.

Simply stated, it is increasingly expensive to spread growth beyond urban edges, stretching public services (such as emergency response), loading up the infrastructure (roads, schools, sewers, water, other utilities), and increasing pollution with each new commuter mile and storm drain.

As a result, government must fall back on improvised patchwork, frantic pothole filling, and fiscal juggling just to keep the urban system functioning at a minimum level. And doesn't that sound a bit like Modesto these days.

It is a matter of quantity vs. quality. For example, the jammed on- and offramps of Highway 99 resulted from undisciplined development beyond that area's carrying capacity. More tax dollars will be spent, but congestion will just get worse.

In a rebuttal to Frohman, Edward Taczanowsky, executive vice president of the Building Industry Association of Central California, cited the law establishing capital facility fees that set up payments by developers to government. He said that “growth pays its way as required by local and state law,” according to a “strict set of legal and financial criteria” established under state procedure guidelines.

So, not to worry. We know how governmental regulations always solve the problems they create—I mean, address.

Frohman wants to ensure that new growth is an asset. Is that asking too much? In Stanislaus County, we are on a fast track

for development that even a new recession wouldn't stop. But stopping it is not the goal—guiding it is.

Development can and must prosper, but it has to be turned away from rich farmlands at the urban edge, back into the city to fill the vacant lots and redevelop the badly used land (and we have lots of it). We need to grow inward and upward, not outward (unless need is clearly established and all impacts are managed).

In a January piece for the Bee, I called for a “town hall meeting on sprawl” to place growth and farmland protection under public scrutiny. The response was underwhelming.

Today we still wait for some leadership, and shouldn't it come from the county executive office, the county planning director, the Board of Supervisors?

What will it take for citizens to become vocal? It will be too late for agonized hand-wringing after the towns east of Highway 99 grow together into one bland urban block, while spreading outward to eat up that priceless, gravity-irrigated farmland that made this county famous. These trends are happening now and approaching irreversibility.

The visioning process was a nice exercise, but now county officials must reinvigorate it, hold the educational forums and book the largest venue for an inclusive, no-holds-barred town hall debate about growth.

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together into one bland urban block, while spreading outward to eat up that priceless, gravity-irrigated farmland that made this county famous. These trends are happening now and approaching irreversibility.

People need to get worried, start a debate, maybe even kick-start some arguments. They need to force local officials to closely address the impacts of sprawl and to look for new ways to save our way of life.

Future columns will ask if we can achieve a future that respects and builds on, but not over our traditions and resources. Can we? Do our residents have the passion and concern? You tell me.

This article appeared in the Modesto Bee on April 12, 2001. Jones is a new community columnist for the Modesto Bee. He has worked in Sacramento as a regional and state land use planner, legislative aide, investigator for the Little Hoover Commission, writer, reporter and editor. He is presently a director of marketing for an international corporation.

SPREADING OUR MESSAGE **ONE BY ONE**

Message from the President...

The Farmland Working Group is a grassroots organization. Grassroots organizations are important because they help communities take charge of their future.

One by one, a community can build a constituency that influences city and county leadership to move to its highest aspirations. The power of one is the building block for our educational program.

Knowledge is power. When the public knows the facts they can communicate effectively with public officials. When voters organize, and are armed with critical information, they become a powerful tool in shaping and taking charge of their future.

The task at hand is to influence and shape public policy before our communities are overrun with traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, declining police protection, increasing taxes and urban blight. We all know that our farmland is a non-renewable resource. Farmland disappears quietly. Once paved over, it is gone forever. Urban sprawl appears just as quietly.

One by one, our volunteer organization is making a difference.

One by one, your donations make a difference. Please take the time to become a member of Farmland Working Group.

Jeani Ferrari, President

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