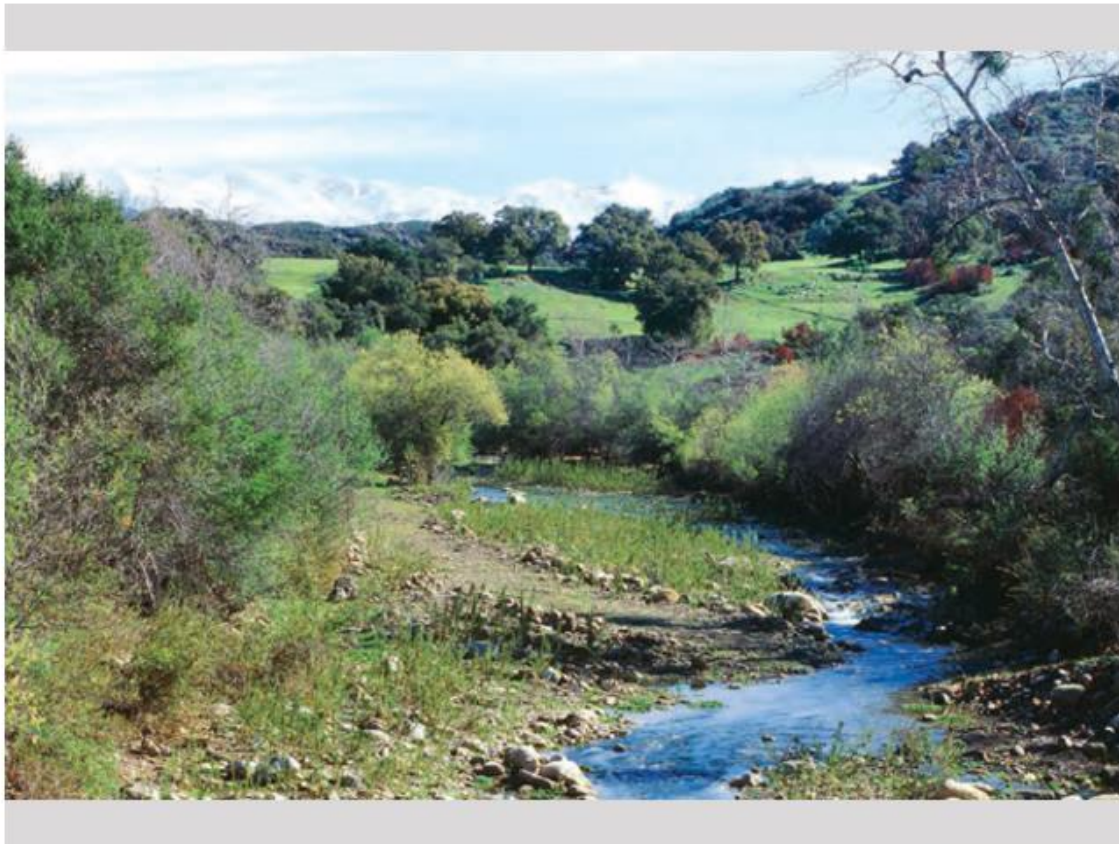


Ventura County voters being asked to extend open-space protections until 2050

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A coalition wants voters to extend Ventura County's rules preserving open space and agricultural land.

Slow-growth advocates are proposing ballot initiatives that would extend by 30 years laws requiring voter approval to develop farmland and open space in Ventura County.

Officials said the initiatives would renew the county's Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources or SOAR laws, which expire in 2020. If approved, voters would extend the restrictions until 2050.

The measures would appear on the ballot for the November 2016 general election, assuming that a voter signature drive succeeds, organizers of the campaign said this week.

"We need to protect our farmland and keep from becoming a sprawling metropolis like the rest of Southern California," said Linda Parks, a county supervisor and board member for SOAR. "We want to protect our quality of life."

Parks said she expects the measures to be opposed by the Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business along with the Building Industry Association.

Officials at the coalition said they could not comment executive director of the 350-member coalition, said in an e-mail. "We would like to see a SOAR that does both."

Backers of the initiative say they have raised \$250,000 for the campaign, but are seeking to raise \$500,000 by this summer. Ultimately they hope to raise \$1 million, Parks said.

Elected officials in Ventura County have adopted measures to conserve farmland over more than 40 years, but SOAR changed the process by requiring public votes to allow developments in protected areas. That essentially ended the ability of elected city council members and the Board of Supervisors to make exceptions in land designated for agriculture or open space, which includes parks, hiking areas and low-density residential areas.

Voters in Ventura barely passed the first SOAR measure with 52 percent in favor in 1995, but the movement spread with voter approval of measures in Camarillo, Oxnard, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, Moorpark and the unincorporated county in the late 1990s. Santa Paula and Fillmore adopted SOAR in the early 2000s.

Supervisor Steve Bennett, president of the SOAR board, said the measures provide some of the strongest land protections against sprawl in the nation by restricting growth two ways. A countywide SOAR prevents the county Board of Supervisors from allowing development of protected land in unincorporated territory while city measures prevent city councils from expanding into that land.

Voters throughout the county would vote on the countywide SOAR while voters in each city would decide their own city SOARs. Approval requires a simple majority, Bennett said.

Word is just getting out about the campaign to renew SOAR so it remains to be seen how business groups will view the issue. Bill Buratto, president and CEO of the Ventura County Economic Development Association, said most people embrace the idea of protecting open space but that the 30-year time span raises some concerns.

"That seems like an awful long time to me," he said.

Bennett said the time span is appropriate, given the support of the public for SOAR.

"We believe it's a core value of the citizens of Ventura County to be involved in the process of these land use decisions," he said.

Buratto said the board of the tax-exempt organization has not taken a position yet, although he welcomed a community dialogue about SOAR and land use.

"We have lived with the SOAR initiatives for approaching 20 years," he said. "I think that we have a better understanding of what was good about SOAR and what were some of the unintended consequences, so we can now have a new dialogue about that."

Parks said the 30-year time span is in keeping with the length of general plans adopted by city councils and the Board of Supervisors. She and others say there is enough room for economic growth within the restrictions of SOAR.

Merrill Berge, a Camarillo resident who is on the SOAR board, says the measures protect agriculture as well as Naval Base Ventura County. They also help limit population, traffic and water use, she said.

"We can grow in a managed way still," said Berge, administrator of Camarillo Sustainable Growth, a nonprofit organization that seeks to preserve agricultural land in the city. "People aren't going to see growth stop."