

VC CoLAB: SOAR IN THE VENTURA COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

By Lynn Gray Jensen

According to Planning Director, Kim Prillhart, all language in the SOAR ordinance relating to agriculture will be directly inserted into the brand new General Plan "Agricultural Element".

The following are excerpts from the SOAR Ordinance that relate to agriculture in Ventura County and are appropriate for inclusion in the Agricultural Element. This language was passed by a vote of the people in 2016:

FINDINGS AND PURPOSE:

Agriculture has been and remains a major contributor to the economy of the County of Ventura, directly and indirectly creating employment for many people, creating enormous actual income which multiplies through the community and generating substantial tax revenues for the County.

Specifically, the Ventura County General Plan provides as follows:

- *Agriculture plays an important role in the National, State, and County economy. Ventura County is one of the principal agricultural counties in the State ranking tenth in 1987, with a total income of over 610 million dollars and ranking seventeenth in farm earnings out of 3,175 counties nationally.*
- *This high productivity is made possible by the County's abundance of the natural resources required for agricultural production; primarily soils, water, climate and topography."*
- *The County of Ventura with its unique combination of soils, microclimate and hydrology has become one of the finest growing regions in the world.*
- *Vegetable and fruit production from the county of Ventura and, in particular, production from the soils and silt from the Santa Clara and Ventura rivers have achieved international acclaim, enhancing the County's economy and reputation and standard of living.*
- *For agriculture to be sustainable in Ventura County, it must remain economically viable. This SOAR ordinance seeks to add and improve necessary goals and policies to encourage agriculture to remain viable in the County for the life of the ordinance and beyond.*
- *Open space designations also include productive lands that are used for agriculture and grazing. These lands are important to the overall economy of the County and the long-term economic viability of these productive lands shall be supported.*
- *The purpose of this initiative is to continue to ensure that agricultural, rural and open space lands are not prematurely or unnecessarily converted to other more intensive development uses incompatible with the purposes of the Agricultural, Open Space and Rural land use designations.*

Thus, this initiative seeks to further Agricultural, Rural and Open Space objectives which could include, for example, adequate farm worker housing. This initiative further proposes to restate and readopt, with minor amendments, the section of the Ventura County General Plan document entitled Goals, Policies and Programs to support Agricultural, Rural and Open Space objectives thereby helping to ensure that agriculture will remain economically viable in the County for the life of the ordinance and beyond, and the beneficial aspects of the Rural and Open Space designations continue to be protected. Accordingly,

the initiative ensures that until December 31, 2050 the General Plan provisions governing Agricultural, Rural and Open Space land use designations and intent, as amended herein, may not be changed except by vote of the people. In addition, the initiative provides that any lands designated as "Agricultural," "Rural" or "Open Space" on the County of Ventura's General Plan "General Land Use Maps" (North Half and South Half of each) [attached as exhibits A and B] adopted by the Board of Supervisors May 24, 1988 as revised through October, 2015 will remain so designated until December 31, 2050 unless the land is redesignated to another land use category by vote of the people, or redesignated by the Board of Supervisors for the County of Ventura pursuant to the procedures set forth in this initiative.

- *This initiative allows the Board of Supervisors to redesignate Rural, Agricultural, and Open Space lands to other more intensive land use designations only if certain findings can be made, including (among other things) that the land is proven to be unsuitable for any form of utilitarian use, and redesignation is necessary to avoid an unconstitutional taking of property without just compensation.*

FARMLAND RESOURCES:

GOALS:

1. *Preserve and protect agricultural lands as a nonrenewable resource to assure the continued availability of such lands for the production of food, fiber and ornamentals.*
2. *Encourage the continuation and development of facilities and programs that support agricultural production and enhance the marketing of County grown agricultural products.*
3. *Improve the economic viability of agriculture through policies that support agriculture as an integral business to the County.*
4. *Encourage opportunities for Ventura County residents to buy local agricultural products.*

POLICIES:

1. *Discretionary development located on land designated as Agricultural (see Land Use Chapter) and identified as Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance on the State's Important Farmland Inventory, shall be planned and designed to remove as little land as possible from potential agricultural production and to minimize impacts on topsoil.*
2. *Hillside agricultural grading shall be regulated by the Public Works Agency through the Hillside Erosion Control Ordinance.*
3. *Land Conservation Act (LCA) Contracts shall be encouraged on irrigated farmlands and Open Space lands.*
4. *The Public Works Agency shall plan transportation capital improvements so as to mitigate impacts to important farmlands to the extent feasible.*
5. *The County shall preserve agricultural land by retaining and expanding the existing Greenbelt Agreements and encouraging the formation of additional Greenbelt Agreements.*
6. *Discretionary development adjacent to Agricultural-designated lands shall not conflict with agricultural use of those lands.*

AGRICULTURAL DESIGNATION:

- *The **Agricultural** designation is applied to irrigated lands which are suitable for the cultivation of crops and the raising of livestock. Because of the inherent importance of agriculture as a land use in and of itself, agriculture is not subsumed under the Open Space land use designation, but has been assigned a separate land use designation.*

- **GOALS:**
 - *Recognize the farmlands within the County that are critical to the maintenance of the local agricultural economy and which are important to the State and Nation for the production of food, fiber and ornamentals.*
 - *Preserve and protect agricultural lands as a nonrenewable resource to assure their continued availability for the production of food, fiber and ornamentals.*
 - *Promote the economic viability of agricultural lands by assisting agricultural producers and establishing zoning policies that support long term investments in agriculture.*
 - *Maintain agricultural lands in parcel sizes which will assure that viable farming units are retained.*
 - *Establish policies and regulations which restrict encourage agricultural land to remain in farming and related uses rather than other development uses.*
 - *Restrict the introduction of conflicting uses into farming areas.*
 - *Subject to state law, the Guidelines for Orderly Development, and applicable zoning requirements, actively promote infrastructure, sized not larger than necessary for the specific project, for farm worker housing to support the continuing viability of agriculture.*

- **POLICIES:**
 - *The Agricultural land use designation shall primarily include lands which are designated as Prime Farmlands, Farmlands of Statewide Importance or Unique Farmlands in the State's Important Farmland Inventory (IFI), although land may not be designated Agricultural if small areas of agricultural land are isolated from larger blocks of farming land (in such cases, the agricultural land is assigned to the Open Space or Rural designation of the surrounding properties).*
 - *The smallest minimum parcel size consistent with the Agricultural land use designation is 40 acres. Subzones may require larger minimum parcel sizes.*
 - *Agricultural land shall be utilized for the production of food, fiber and ornamentals; animal husbandry and care; uses accessory to agriculture and limited temporary or public uses.*
 - *To preserve the maximum amount of land in agricultural production as possible, the processing of food beyond the limits currently allowed by Ventura County's general plan and policies should take place in existing urban areas that have appropriate supporting infrastructure.*

Notwithstanding the foregoing limitations on the Board of Supervisors, in order to support the processing of locally grown food, before January 1 of 2030 the Board of Supervisors may, without a vote of the people, re-designate up to a total of 12 acres of land over the life of this initiative, dispersed throughout the County, provided they comply with the following conditions:

- *The Board has amended the appropriate provisions of the County's General Plan and other planning policies, and the amendment(s) conform with state laws governing such land use designations;*
- *The Board finds the re-designation will allow for the processing of locally grown food that would otherwise likely be transported out of county for processing;*
- *The re-designated land is no greater than 3 acres in size and does not require the expansion or extension of new sewer lines to the facility; and,*
- *The Board of Supervisors approved the action with at least four of the five Supervisors voting in the affirmative.*

OPEN SPACE DESIGNATION:

- *The Open Space designation encompasses land as defined under Section 65560 of the State Government Code as any parcel or area of land or water which is essentially unimproved and devoted to an open-space use as defined in this section, and which is designated on a local, regional or State open-space plan as any of the following:*
 - *Open Space should also include areas set aside for managed production of resources, including, but not limited to, forest lands, rangeland, agricultural lands not otherwise designated Agricultural; areas required for the recharge of groundwater basins; bays, estuaries, marshes, rivers, and streams which are important for the management of commercial fisheries; and areas containing major mineral deposits, including those in short supply.*
- **GOALS:**
 - *Land Conservation Act (LCA) Contracts shall be encouraged on farming and grazing and open space lands.*
 - *Support the productive agricultural activities of Open Space designated lands that are commonly used for agriculture, grazing, and ranching and that are important to the overall economy of Ventura County.*
- **POLICIES:**
 - *Open Space should also include areas set aside for managed production of resources, including, but not limited to, forest lands, rangeland, agricultural lands not otherwise designated Agricultural; areas required for the recharge of groundwater basins; bays, estuaries, marshes, rivers, and streams which are important for the management of commercial fisheries; and areas containing major mineral deposits, including those in short supply.*