

LAFCO

Santa Barbara Local Agency Formation Commission

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March 1, 2007 (Agenda)

Local Agency Formation Commission
105 East Anapamu Street
Santa Barbara CA 93101

Possible “Study Session” on Agricultural Preservation.

Dear Members of the Commission:

RECOMMENDATION

Consider agricultural preservation in light of LAFCO’s statutory responsibilities and authority and provide direction to staff.

DISCUSSION

Members of the Commission, notably Commissioners Centeno and Firestone, at the last meeting discussed agricultural preservation, specifically related to how LAFCO might be involved in protecting and enhancing the County’s agricultural resources.

The staff has placed this matter on the agenda to allow discussion by members of the Commission. The staff would make the following notations to facilitate a dialogue:

Agricultural Resources and Spheres of Influence

A basic LAFCO function is regulation of local governmental boundaries. It would be beneficial in a discussion of agricultural resources to be able to refer to maps of agricultural land in the County in relation to adopted spheres of influence for cities and special districts.

Given that extensive mappings of agricultural resources has already been accomplished by the County it should not be too difficult to prepare illustrative maps for a future Commission meeting or LAFCO-sponsored workshop.

Statutory and Policy Framework

The Commission, by statute and local policy, is concerned with preserving agricultural resources.

- Attached as Exhibit A are excerpts regarding agriculture and open space taken from LAFCO's enabling statute, the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act.
- Attached as Exhibit B are excerpts from the Commissioner Handbook, "Policy Guidelines and Standards" which refer to agricultural and open space lands.

Past Commission actions illustrate direction regarding agricultural preservation. In considering annexations to the City of Santa Maria in 1994, LAFCO encouraged the City and County to adopt a "green belt" agreement as a joint policy pledging to keep specific areas in permanent agriculture. (Note: The City adopted a map of such an area; the County chose not to do so.)

In 1998 the Commission denied a City of Lompoc request to extend its sphere of influence west onto prime agricultural land in the Bailey Avenue Corridor, encouraging the City instead to grow onto areas with less agricultural value. As a result the City planned for and the Commission in 2006 approved the Burton Ranch Annexation to the City in the Wye/Mission Hills area.

Buffers Between Incompatible Uses

The actual regulation of land use is reserved by State law to units of general government, i.e. cities and counties, which act through general and specific plans, zoning and entitlements.

In exercising its function to regulate boundaries LAFCO is specifically prohibited from imposing conditions that would directly regulate land use or subdivision requirements. The Commission cannot, for example, condition its approval of annexations that directs how the affected land can be used or that specific subdivision standards shall apply.

On the other hand the Commission can withhold its approval of boundary changes until conditions are satisfactory with regard to, for example, land use incompatibility issues such as agricultural buffers or conditions relative to the adequate provision of public services.

Residential uses built too close to farms may result in complaints about noise, dust or pesticides, and lead to pressures to restrict farming practices. Attention recently focused on land that was annexed to the City of Guadalupe in 1995, known as the DJ Farms Reorganization. The land use plan presented at the time of LAFCO's approval was not built out and a new plan is being considered which, I understand, encroaches more closely on adjacent productive agriculture.

LAFCO has no jurisdiction to regulate land uses within a city nor did LAFCO at the time DJ Farms was approved require the City or owner to permanently restrict land uses adjacent to the City boundary to uses compatible with agriculture.

It can be argued that buffers between urban uses and agriculture should be placed where ultimate urban buildout is expected. The decision in 1998 to deny extending the City of Lompoc's sphere further west may not have resolved the land use incompatibility issue. Agriculture practices are occurring just on the other side of the back fences of single-family homes. In terms of a stable, defensible agricultural buffer it may be advisable to allow the City to extend further onto agricultural land if that establishes an improved, permanent buffer that avoid incompatible uses from being immediately adjacent to each other.

Where To Go From Here

As a countywide agency with a unique, mixed composition, LAFCO might be in a favorable position to conduct or sponsor a "study session" as a forum to examine this issue. A "study session" is a formal agendized discussion but with the understanding no specific actions would be taken by LAFCO other than to receive information and provide direction to staff as appropriate.

The study session might focus on the "State of the County's Agricultural Economy" and provide responses to the following and many other questions:

- Where is the best farmland?
- Where is the County's "niche" in agricultural markets?
- How much employment in the County– direct and secondary – is based on agriculture?
- What are the long-term prospects for continued agricultural use?
- What factors affect agricultural production and value, i.e. land costs, labor costs, water availability, international competition?
- Where is farmland most threatened by planned or prospective urban development?

The agenda could perhaps include presentations by the County Agricultural Commissioner, the Farm Bureau and others, allow public discourse on this subject and members of the Commission could provide direction with respect to LAFCO's role in agricultural protection.

This item is placed on LAFCO's agenda to allow discussion by the Commission and direction to staff with respect to whether further steps should be taken.

Sincerely,

BOB BRAITMAN
Executive Officer

Government Code Section 56300. It is intent of the Legislature that:

". . . each commission establish policies and exercise its powers pursuant to this part in a manner that encourages and provides planned, well-ordered, efficient urban development patterns with appropriate consideration of preserving open-space lands within those patterns."

Government Code Section 56301:

Among the purposes of a commission are discouraging urban sprawl, preserving open-space and prime agricultural lands, efficiently providing government services, and encouraging the orderly formation and development of local agencies based upon local conditions and circumstances.

One of the objects of the commission is to make studies and to obtain and furnish information which will contribute to the logical and reasonable development of local agencies in each county and to shape the development of local agencies so as to advantageously provide for the present and future needs of each county and its communities.

Government Code Section 56377:

"In reviewing and approving or disapproving proposals which could reasonably be expected to induce, facilitate, or lead to the conversion of existing open-space lands to uses other than open-space uses, the commission shall consider all of the following policies and priorities:

(a) Development or use of land for other than open-space uses shall be guided away from existing prime agricultural lands in open-space use toward areas containing nonprime agricultural lands, unless that action would not promote the planned, orderly, efficient development of an area.

(b) Development of existing vacant or nonprime agricultural lands for urban uses within the existing jurisdiction of a local agency or within the sphere of influence of a local agency should be encouraged before any proposal is approved which would allow for or lead to the development of existing open-space lands for non-open-space uses which are outside of the existing jurisdiction of the local agency or outside of the existing sphere of influence of the local agency."

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EXHIBIT B

II. SPHERE OF INFLUENCE POLICIES

The Commission will generally apply the following policy guidelines in spheres of influence determinations while also taking into account local conditions and needs.

10. Agricultural resources and support facilities should be given special consideration in sphere of influence designations. High value agriculture areas, including areas of established crop production, with soils of high agricultural capability should be maintained in agriculture, and in general should not be included in an urban service sphere of influence.

V. POLICIES ENCOURAGING CONSERVATION OF PRIME AGRICULTURAL LANDS AND OPEN SPACE AREAS

1. Proposals which would conflict with the goals of maintaining the physical and economic integrity of open space lands, agricultural lands, or agricultural preserve areas in open space uses, as indicated on the city or county general plan, shall be discouraged.
4. Loss of agricultural lands should not be a primary issues for annexation where city and county general plans both indicate that urban development is appropriate and where there is consistency with the agency's sphere of influence. However, the loss of any primer agricultural soils should be balanced against other LAFCO policies and a LAFCO goal of conserving such lands.