FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE
IN
YOLO COUNTY

Report of a Citizens’ Conference

May 8, 1993

In cooperation with
University of California
Agricultural Issues Center

September, 1993
YOLO COUNTY FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE CONFERENCE
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Numerous land-use planning efforts are underway in this region. The steering committee acknowledges the prodigious work of the professional staff, elected and appointed officials, and volunteer organizations in developing these plans and attempting to preserve open space for future generations.
PREFACE

Helen Thomson, Yolo County Supervisor
and
Ann Scheuring, Yolo County Planning Commission

We are pleased to present this report of the May, 1993, Yolo County Farmland and Open Space Conference. Many people representing diverse interests gathered to talk about local land use and the future we want for our part of California. This was the kind of event that can inspire good things to happen!

As the Conference co-chairs, we, like others, are concerned that the momentum not be lost. We need to keep collecting information, to maintain enthusiasm and energy for imaginative planning, and to initiate and support broad-based efforts to conserve our important farmlands and enhance other open space uses.

How can we do this? We have several recommendations.

We believe that Yolo County should have an appointed Farmland and Open Space Task Force to pursue some of the options suggested in this report. Such a task force, an advisory group appointed for a limited time to perform a set task, ought to include all local jurisdictions and planning interests. All points of view must be represented for meaningful dialogue—and positive results.

The Task Force could be charged with developing and recommending a comprehensive, collaborative public policy package on farmlands and open space which would be reviewed and approved by local governments. The Task Force could go even further— assembling practical proposals for financing programs, writing grant applications, and reviewing various projects for their contribution to conservation goals.

We continue to believe that the policy proposals published by the American Farmland Trust in Risks, Challenges and Opportunities: Agriculture, Resources and Growth in a Changing Central Valley (1989) need implementation. Yolo County should:
- Have an agricultural element in its general plan.
- Require farmland conversion to be considered a "significant environmental impact."
- Implement programs for purchase and/or transfer of development-rights.
- Encourage donation or purchase of conservation easements on farmland.
- Collect "impact fees" for development.
- Form special assessment districts for land conservation purposes.

These actions would go far toward protecting our agricultural land resources for decades to come. While we might need to explore further the details of some of these strategies, we need to begin now while we still have time to influence the future. A start has been made: LAFCO policy discussions over agricultural preservation criteria for annexations and questions about ultimate limit lines and spheres of influence have given rise to a "white paper" by planning staffs throughout the county.

Farming is, of course, not only a land use but a business. Because a strong agricultural economy will help to preserve our farmland base, we must pursue policies that support local agriculture—e.g., direct marketing programs, agricultural enterprise zones for processing and other agriculturally-related businesses, and active recruitment of business and industry related to the agricultural economy. We must also protect and conserve our water resources, which are the lifeblood of agriculture.

We should encourage the conservation efforts that are already under way such as the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping, a joint project of the Sierra Club and the Yolo County Farm Bureau. The county’s own GIS mapping is already playing a role in resource planning.
We should support expansion of current efforts at habitat restoration. Because of the work of some individual farmers and the Resource Conservation District, for example, Yolo County is beginning to achieve a significant reputation for “multiple-use” management of farmland. We should applaud landowners who are pursuing new strategies that connect agricultural production with wildlife havens and corridors—among them, hedgerow plantings of native species and farm ponds designed to shelter bird populations.

Within the last year, in cooperation with the cities and the California Fish & Game Department, Yolo County has initiated a Habitat Management Plan. This is an excellent starting point for mapping, preserving and/or enhancing local habitat for migratory waterfowl, upland game, and threatened species. Another major effort underway is the interagency planning, both public and private, for a major waterfowl refuge in the Yolo Bypass. Just completed and submitted to Congress is the Putah Creek Management Plan; and we have at hand an opportunity to create a Cache Creek Resources Management Plan.

One of the most important goals for the Task Force would be to identify practical ways to fund farmland and open space conservation objectives. Information gathering, data base preparation, planning for rights-of-way, land acquisition and management, “farmscaping” and resource conservation work—all need funding. In a better economic climate, tax funds might be available through sale of general obligation bonds, sales tax surcharges or special district property assessments, but each of these mechanisms poses special problems in convincing voters of their importance. (Another option would be formation of a county-wide agricultural preservation and open space district.)

Conservation goals, to be successful, need the broad and enthusiastic support of the general public—those who live in both the urban and rural parts of our county, those who can be encouraged to recognize the important economic, social and aesthetic benefits that open land confers upon our lives. Building a solid base of support will take time, and needs a process for dialogue and for public education.

Last but not least, we must all recognize an important underlying issue: the driving force behind much of agricultural land conversion is population growth. The success of our efforts in Yolo County will ultimately be determined by our collective willingness to make the best and most efficient use of our lands—using urban redevelopment and revitalization strategies and encouraging higher urban densities in our cities, coupled with strong agricultural preservation and resource conservation strategies in rural areas.

Time is beginning to run out for the preservation of the precious, productive agricultural lands and open space still surrounding us in Yolo County. The future depends on us. We urge our readers to join this cause of stewardship.
INTRODUCTION

Although it lies within one of the nation's most rapidly growing regions, Yolo County today still retains much of its farmland and open space atmosphere. However, regional economic and population pressures for development are increasing, and land is being converted to other uses. How much open space—how much agricultural land, how much natural habitat—is Yolo County likely to have in 30 years? In 50 years?

Those questions are asked by many Yolo County citizens who want to conserve this county's heritage of farmland and open space, while still making room for some of the growth that is inevitable in the lower Sacramento Valley.

On May 8, 1993, at the Yolo County Farmland and Open Space Conference, 185 concerned citizens looked for answers. The conference grew out of a similar event held two years before, (The "2020 Conference.") At that time, participants stressed the need for agreed-upon strategies to protect the farmland and natural habitats which are so important to Yolo County's identity.

Accordingly, the 1993 Conference was planned to consider farmland and open space conservation strategies:

- To seek feasible local solutions to complex land use planning problems.
- To identify open space funding options.
- To encourage creative partnerships that work cooperatively toward common purposes.

Although a panel of experts on land use and urban planning set the stage, the Conference consisted primarily of 10 discussion groups, each with 12 to 15 members of differing viewpoints. Participants included members of city councils and local government agencies as well as representatives of home building and development interests, the Farm Bureau, environmental and farmland conservation groups and local Chambers of Commerce. Each group met for several hours, with a recorder making note of ideas, agreements and disagreements.

This report summarized their conclusions. Because so many individuals were involved, names are not included. However, selected quotations printed in italics in the margin suggest the flavor of the discussions.

The shared vision

Although viewpoints on priorities and strategies differed, most if not all of the Conference participants appeared to agree on three assumptions about the future of Yolo County:

Yolo County is identified by its blocks of farmland, riparian areas, wetlands and natural habitat. The best way to preserve that identity is to work toward retaining open space.
Smaller parcels of open space might be linked to provide natural habitat areas, while others might be joined to form bikeways or trails, thus creating wildlife corridors and human corridors.

With very little original native habitat left, it is particularly important to gain access or title to lands that are still relatively pristine, in order to assure their protection permanently.

- Maintaining much of the county’s open space for many decades into the future will not be easy, but it is an achievable goal.
- At the same time, the county should—in fact, must—absorb its share of regional population growth.
- These two goals can be reconciled by a process of long-range planning, broad-based revenue sources, inter-governmental cooperation and public education.

**THE OPEN SPACE RESOURCE**

Conference participants grappled with the problem of defining the exact meaning of “open space.” Four categories were identified: farmland, natural wildlife habitat, scenic areas and recreation areas. All need protection from inadequately planned urbanization and from incompatible uses.

Priority, many conferees said, should go to the “highest and best” long-range use of the land. For most prime farmland, that means agriculture, which is a productive, industrial use of open space with its own special priorities and needs. Buffer zones should exist between urban areas and agriculture or natural habitat—for example, along Highway 113 between Woodland and Davis and along the river between West Sacramento and the Elkhorn interchange.

Compatibility among land uses (farming, development, recreation, wildlife habitat) was another top priority discussed by conferees. Already-proven compatibilities should be encouraged—for example, the use of winter-flooded rice fields as waterfowl habitat, or the use of hedgerow windbreaks in row and field crop areas.

More public open space is needed, participants agreed. Some parcels currently for sale should be set aside as potential wetlands or wildlife preserves. Man-made “natural” habitats, such as the West Davis and Northstar ponds, could be incorporated into future development projects. Existing wildlife corridors in the Yolo Bypass and along various sloughs and creeks should be restored and enhanced where possible.

Public access to privately owned open space is a thorny issue, posing the potential for vandalism and other abuses. As an incentive, farmers might be compensated for expanding their concept of “farming” to include “land stewardship” and “protection of the biodiversity.” However, few farmers would welcome the idea of public access unless it was strictly controlled. Conferees suggested that some farms might be developed as regional parks, thus specifically dealing with access problems. This would require long range planning and funding for land acquisition and ongoing management.

**Role of agriculture**

The future of farmland as the major component of open space in Yolo County requires more than zoning. It also depends on the econom-
ics of crop production and processing. Particularly where it interfaces with urban areas, the economic viability of local agriculture within its regional and global context must be given high policy priority.

Agriculture and agriculture-related industry should continue to be promoted as the base of the county's economy and as an important local source of jobs. At the same time, however, it's important to encourage economic diversity. Public and private efforts could help develop more agricultural support industries, processing facilities, research opportunities, and enterprises that recycle agricultural waste products. One way to do this would be to create buffered zones for agricultural industry.

The sale of significant amounts of Yolo County's irrigation water supply, particularly in dry years, has serious implications for the local agricultural economy. Out-of-basin transfers of groundwater are a particular threat because of their potential impacts on the groundwater resource and on land subsidence. Water transfers should be carefully monitored and restricted to minimize third-party effects. One suggestion is to add a charge for each acre-foot of exported water in order to offset losses to local government and to the environment.

Agriculture as a way of life in Yolo County may be endangered. We need to protect not only prime soils, but also food production itself.

How will the land be used by agriculture, and how should we evaluate that use? What are the merits of a sod farm versus a tomato field? What are the secondary effects of what is grown on the land?
URBANIZATION PRESSURES

The other aspect of Yolo County’s open space dilemma is the need to provide housing for a growing population and to encourage a diverse economic base to create jobs. Many conference participants urged that, as much as possible, Yolo County should minimize its role as a bedroom community for nearby metropolitan areas and seek a tenable jobs-housing ratio.

To minimize some of the pressure for residential development in rural areas, conference participants discussed the need to preserve or enhance the quality of life in urban areas. “Quality” of urban life in Yolo County might include:

- Good design coupled with planned maximum density.
- Open space, public recreation facilities and even some protected wildlife habitats within urbanized areas.
- Limited town size.
- Good water supply, air quality and protection from flooding.
- Adequate and affordable housing. Needs of first-time home buyers should receive special consideration.

Long-range plans also might include new small cities on the less productive land, if such development could be compatible with water, air quality and transportation standards. Some conference participants preferred the idea of satellite towns rather than entirely new towns in more remote areas. In any case, any new urbanized area should be self-sustaining as much as possible, striving for a reasonable balance between jobs and housing.

Citizens and public officials need to be better informed about housing options, innovative high-density housing designs, and greenbelt opportunities.

Regional urbanization

The need for good urban planning in Yolo County as a way to indirectly conserve rural open space comes out of regional population trends—expansion pressures from Sacramento and Solano counties, from the I-5 corridor, from the Bay Area. The challenge is to limit and/or to guide both development itself and growth-inducing factors. In this process, there is an important role for developers. While land speculation should be discouraged, developers who “play by the rules” should be encouraged to consider long-range goals and rewarded for their innovative efforts.

One particular challenge is to get community input on the question of determining urban limits. Should cities and towns continue to develop more or less concentrically, or should “ultimate” urban limits be established to conserve rural land resources far into the future?
GOALS AND STRATEGIES FOR OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION

A key theme at the Conference was purposeful management of change in Yolo County land and resource use during the coming decades. Because Yolo County has so far been successful in protecting farmland and open space, citizens here have a tradition of both philosophy and practice. With emerging development pressures, however, new programs and possibly new strategies may be called for.

Specific proposals at the Conference dealt with strategies to preserve farmland and open space, with alternative financing options and with the planning process itself. A first step, clearly, would be to organize the available information base in order to:

- Consolidate findings from studies already carried out by environmental groups and others. Examples: Sierra Club, UC Davis, Farm Bureau, Soil Conservation Service.

- Identify important gaps in information.

- Inventory land uses in the county, including existing farmlands and open space, while developing computerized Geographic Information Systems for cumulative monitoring.

- Inventory existing unused railroad rights of way for possible recreational use—bike paths, hiking trails.

Improvement in data base collection and computer use might well be accomplished through joint public and private funding.

We need to study the Solano County experience. Look at what's happened along the I-80 corridor.
Yolo County must retain separations between communities, using the land's natural features if possible.

Resource protection

Another immediate goal is a "strategic resources plan" aimed at critical areas of the county, and concerned with both agricultural/open space issues and economic development. A Conference consensus was that any such plan or agreement to determine future land use in Yolo County must be a cooperative effort between the county and cities.

It also should:

- Distinguish productive agricultural land from other kinds of open space.

- Define an acceptable buffer between farmland and city. Buffers should be on the urban side of the fence—a minimum of 500 feet.

- Encourage separate and distinct communities.

- Focus new city growth inward while maximizing existing infrastructure, including public facilities.

- Identify and protect waterways and water resources.

- Support policies that make it possible for agriculture to operate profitably.

- Take into account environmental needs—air, water, energy. Establish strong links between air quality, land use, and transportation planning and policies.

- Take into account Yolo County's relationship to regional and global economic realities.

Some specific options

Fair and efficient incentives should be devised to encourage infill (higher population density) within cities and to penalize the sprawl of development onto prime farmland. Several groups suggested purchasing development rights (or "conservation easements") on strategically located farmland, through private programs (land trust) or through a county agricultural conservation ordinance, or both.

The topic of purchase of development rights (PDR) aroused much discussion. While it might safeguard long-term food production as well as protect open space, PDR might also increase costs of development, thus making housing less affordable. Other issues and questions were raised regarding PDR, clearly indicating both interest in and need for more information about this new tool, and its potential for political controversy.

Another significant point of discussion was the degree of permanency of land use planning tools. Should land-use controls be
long-term but subject to review in future years, or should they be designed to last indefinitely? Members of one group actually voted on this issue. They strongly favored permanency for “sacred lands”—important scenic areas and recreation sites. Urban limit lines also were supported, but the group split on the question of permanent status for intensive agriculture.

Getting started

What specific first steps might be taken for proactive conservation of farmland and open space?

One strong suggestion was to update the Yolo County General Plan, using input from task forces, in order to add a comprehensive agricultural element to the General Plan. Among other things, this element should identify viable as well as prime farmland, and should include policies that would support agriculture. Cities also could have an ag element in their general plans.

Other suggestions were to:

- Revise the open space and recreational element to include habitat and regional public recreation.

- Set specific priorities for protection/acquisition of identified agricultural and open space lands. The county supervisors and city councils could adopt a ranking system for land use.

To protect their vineyards, Napa County residents have “locked in” their agricultural plan so it can’t be changed by replacing elected officials.
OPTIONS FOR FINANCING

What combinations of public and private financing might be used to meet the costs of protecting agriculture and open space in Yolo County—in particular, the expensive process of acquiring conservation easements and buffer zones?

Certain general approaches were recommended:

- Development (or “mitigation”) fees for urban expansion. One possibility is a graduated fee on development of land at the city’s edge. By raising costs at that location, such a fee would make it more economic to infill within the city and also would provide money for public purchase of development rights farther out. These fees would directly impact developers and home buyers, raising purchase prices.

- Public financing through taxes or assessments. Because everyone shares the benefits of open space, a substantial share of the costs should be borne by all county residents. This could be done through special districts, general obligation bonds, and/or a sales tax. Possibilities include a countywide open space district as in Marin County, or an assessment district with one or more of several purposes: (1) to acquire land conservation easements, (2) to protect water resources, (3) to expand wetlands.

- Earmarked funds for open space projects, raised by a special sales tax. Taxpayers would need to be convinced of the benefits.

- Exploration of external funding sources, such as state park bonds, the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the U.S.D.A. Conservation Reserve Program, or the California Department of Forestry District Stewardship Incentive Program, as well as private donations and grants.

Funding considerations also should include the public and private costs of maintaining open space resources—for example, wildfire control and sheriff patrol.
THE PROCESS: PLANNING AND CONSENSUS-BUILDING

For a reasonable chance of protecting open space in Yolo County into the 21st Century, the crucial requirements are a long-range plan, local government cooperation and public support.

City-county cooperation

Almost unanimously, discussion groups at the Conference emphasized the urgent need for city and county governments to coordinate their land-use decisions. Revenue sharing and tax-base sharing also are crucial. Coordination with neighboring counties on regional issues is another necessity. Local governments need to discuss land use plans with agencies such as CalTrans and public utilities.

Specific suggestions:

- Get funds from any available and appropriate source so that local planners can pull together a comprehensive open space conservation program to show to developers, landowners and the public.

- Use city and county general plan updates as tools for joint planning; note their different goals and cooperatively re-design them to eliminate unnecessary competition or conflict.

- Use LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission) to develop consensus on long-range spheres of influence.

- To discourage parochial thinking, use SACOG (Sacramento Area Council of Governments) and LAFCO to unify regional strategies. Strengthen SACOG's emphasis to include agriculture and open space. Encourage roundtable discussions among cities and counties.

- Streamline the permit review process for development projects that meet open space goals.

Informed public support

Preservation of farmland and open space in Yolo County, in the words of one group at the Conference, "can only be accomplished if vision, planning and education result in a coalition of community groups." But how can consensus be developed among different interests and within the general public? The answer is that coalitions of various groups must inform the public and develop support for their shared vision, particularly with regard to funding proposals.

Conference participants emphasized the need:

- To maintain rural/urban balance on decision-making bodies.

- To encourage sharing of existing and future information and inventories.
It's time to form alliances and work together. We need a formal ongoing process for communication. Good comes from continued talking.

- To encourage more joint public meetings of elected officials.

- Most important, to keep discussion alive by establishing one or more task forces or commissions. Possible topics: agricultural and open space elements, funding mechanisms.

One important question is whether these groups should be composed of largely like-minded members, who could more easily produce decisions but might be considered biased; or whether such appointed bodies should purposefully reflect diverse interests. In the latter case, all important interests must be represented, and all members committed to achieving a joint solution.

Participants in the 1993 Farmland and Open Space Conference clearly believed that Yolo County's heritage of open space and farmland can co-exist with future population growth and economic development—but that we must collectively recognize how complex the issues are. This report is part of the necessary educational process. A next step is cooperative, community-level efforts during the coming years to make the shared vision a reality.

This report was published by University of California Agricultural Issues Center, UC Davis
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Production: Arden Culver