

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

FORMALLY KNOWN AS CENTRAL VALLEY FOOD AND FARMLAND COALITION

Our Mission is to Educate and Build Alliances to protect our uniquely productive California Central Valley farmland.



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New Towns in Merced County?

By Roberta Avilla

On Wednesday July 9, 2008, Merced County Planners voted to accept the plans of a 16,000 home development called Villages of Laguna San Luis. The Merced County Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 to accept the Final Environmental Impact Report, another step toward final approval of the largest development ever built in Merced County. Housing 45,000 people at its build-out, it will essentially become a new town for Merced County.

Villages of Laguna San Luis involves 6,200 acres of land, half of which will be covered by houses. It will also include schools, parks, fire and sheriff substations, a landfill, commercial and business space, and some open land thrown in to boot. The plan has been twenty years in the making and the investors are a group of local land owners.

For a de-



veloper, Laguna is a gold-mine. One cannot dream for much more than the development of a whole new independent community. New towns are not for the faint of heart. They are the equivalent of the most extreme of

the 'extreme sports' of development. Valley newspapers of 100 years ago used to do a front page feature story on the building of the latest house in town. They would describe its architectural style, cost, builder and the family that was going to own it. One new house was news in 1908. Those folks could never have imagined that towns a century on down the line would not be planned and built one new house at a time.

Are new towns the wave of the future for Central California planning? Or are they a dream that our declining energy and water supplies cannot bring to fruition?

There is one certainty with new towns. They do not financially support their local inhabitants. There are very few jobs available in new towns for decades upon decades. New towns cannot instantly produce a vital local economy that new residents can plug into. In years gone by people were drawn to a town because of the jobs that were offered to sustain it, the resulting homes were a

natural progression of this and were something to be celebrated.

Putting the residential cart before the job horse results in creating an energy drain and pollution strain that our Central Valley certainly does not need. Creating 16,000 homes worth of residents who will need to get into their cars to drive to work, go to

a doctor, or do anything more than the simplest of shopping tasks is dark ages planning at its worst. The plan may work for the developer's pocketbooks, but it does nothing to help our already desperate air quality and energy situation.

The most frightening aspect of a new town is its water usage. Villages of Laguna San Luis developers say they have plans to arrange contracts to purchase and transport water to their development. When local West Side farmers are letting soil lay fallow because of water shortages those claims raise eyebrows of suspicion and distrust. If one could build a giant scale and place safe and secure food for our nation on one side, and housing for 16,000 mostly Bay Area commuting families on the other side, one would hope that the scales would tip in favor of food.

Agriculture is Merced County's lifeblood. It is the county's num-

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President Jean Okuye

President's Message

Water, or lack of, takes top priority in conversations in the Central Valley. Crops are plowed under while plans for establishing a 45,000 population new city near Los Banos, Merced County, are waved on by the Merced County Planning Commission.

Talk of global warming and business as usual, as general plan updates read for more of the same...low density, spread out on farmland.

Less water, more people. What is the solution; as we all know we have a finite water supply.

As you may have seen in the Modesto Bee or Merced Sun-Star, August 3 I had an open house for my new straw bale house, the first in Merced County. More than 200 came; I'm still getting calls requesting a visit. I am happy to

show how I can live without air conditioning, with a \$12/month electric bill using my solar system (though it cost me \$19,000 up front), with native and other drought resistant landscaping to name a few features.

But this summer, my ranch has not only an energy efficient house with water savings, but it has a well for water to manage my almond orchard; this is a first in the 100 year history of my family ranch as far as I know. I am now taking from an aquifer I have been preaching we need to protect. And I have learned that Livingston may be threatened with pulling salty water. I'm not far away.

And maybe all of us are not far away from water which is disappearing and polluted. Shall we guarantee

water for our food protection and continue to monitor it for purity, or should we continue to guarantee water for our low density developments which will pave over the farmland? We all know that when push comes to shove who will get the last drop...not agriculture.

Please consider speaking out and joining us in protecting our water and quality of life in this Central Valley. Become a member, write us, attend your local meetings where decisions are being made which affect YOU.

And if you would like to visit my straw bale house, please give me a call. 209-394-2421. It's truly cool!

Valley Land Alliance in Action

Although Central California has some of the highest rates of foreclosures in the nation, development plans for many more houses continues. VLA is actively questioning the continuation of approving paving over more farmland. We have spoken at many Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission meetings in Merced area. Our voice is heard at Livingston, Los Banos and Merced Cities' general plan update meetings besides at the Merced County general plan update meetings.

Ranchettes, small parcels being split off larger farming parcels, has been a concern we have expressed with city

planners and decision makers. Policy for determining how these decisions are made has been questioned. What is the policy? When does the Planning Hearing Officer, a staff person, make the decision? When does he/she send request on to Planning Commissioners for a decision?

At California State Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura's Vision Planning meetings in Sacramento and Visalia, VLA was present to hear many farmers concerned about the ranchettes being a major obstacle to farming in our valley. VLA also made comments at the Visalia meeting.

This Spring we co-hosted the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition with

the Merced-Mariposa Cattlemen's Association and Merced County Farm Bureau. More than 110 people heard testimony of farmers working to benefit the environment and agriculture.

May was a busy month for VLA. We attended the Great Valley Center annual conference in Sacramento, exchanging ideas with many. We participated in the Palo Alto Student Day at Magness Dairy, which is now an annual event. More than 100 students learned about cows, milk, Merced River, land use issues and cultural history. We are grateful for the students' donation of \$267 to Valley Land Alliance, which they earned from a car wash. *See Action on p 6*





The Spotlight

Welcome to the spotlight, where we take the light off ourselves and let it shine on members of the community. We want to know what other people are thinking.

Thoughts on Preserving Farmland into Perpetuity

From the Desk of Merced County Board of Supervisor Deidre Kelsey

Not too many people would disagree that farmland is a valuable Merced County resource that needs to be preserved for future generations. However, preserving farmland is a complex puzzle. It's not just having a willing seller of the development potential of the land, but having a number of other things lined up which are perhaps, more tenuous. The devil truly is in the details, and the details are many.

For a parcel to be preserved into perpetuity as a working farm, there has to be a willing seller. And just what makes that seller willing? The price he or she is paid for the rights they are parting with is just one consideration. There must also be adequate funding to purchase the development rights. Funding is often difficult to obtain, and new sources are always needed. While there are some monies available through state approved propositions and also private foundations, these

sources fall short of supporting the efforts of preservationists. There is also some limited local development-driven mitigation dollars. This small pot is directly tied to paving over good farmland to protect other land. For some it seems counterintuitive.

With all this talk of funding for conservation easements, it almost gets lost that the farm itself must be profitable enough to sustain itself, for perpetuity. And that is where the real difficulties lie. There are many variables that go into making a farm a profitable business. What may constitute a good living for one family, may not work for another family. A reliable water source, a strong market for the product, as well as a fair regulatory climate, all play into ensuring the long term profitability of a farm.

Local government can and should take into account, when considering various land use applications, that it must ensure that the business of farming sustains its economic viability.

By raising the awareness and being supportive of compatible land uses which could enhance a farm, decision makers will not detract from the easement potentials within the farming regions. Being supportive of those uses which enhance long term viability of agriculture is fundamental. Over time a farm family will need to make business decisions to build upon the economic base established at the time the easements were obtained. Diversifying and enhancing the economic potential of conserved farmlands will be even more important in the future if farming is to keep pace with the economics necessary to sustain our agricultural resources.





“Every week, year round, they receive a box of fresh organically grown vegetables and a newsletter that contains recipes.”

Farming for Eaters, Everyone Benefits

By David Silveira

It’s been two years since we started farming for the people who will eat the food we grow, which may sound crazy to most farmers who farm for brokers or corporate buyers. Many farms today are over-capitalized, and sell products in large quantities at low margins. This method of farming is very effective at keeping beginning farmers from entering the marketplace. It also results in consolidation of farms, and the elimination of small family farms from our communities and local economies.

We had always wanted to farm, but we did not have the resources to do it in the conventional way. We knew that there were many people who wanted to see small beginning farmers succeed, and wanted to buy fresh, healthy organically grown food from a local farmer at a fair price. So, we

started a “Community Supported Agriculture” (CSA) farm for them.

People sign-up to be subscribers or members of the farm. Every week, year round, they receive a box of fresh organically grown vegetables and a newsletter that contains recipes. In turn, we receive income to keep our farm growing. Our members learn how to eat with the seasons, get introduced to new foods, eat foods that have not been sprayed with harmful pesticides, learn about farming, attend farm events, eat food that is fully ripe before it is harvested, and eat varieties of vegetables that are selected for good taste rather than how far they will ship.

As oil prices increase even the government recognizes the importance of regional food independence and food security. CSA farms can pro-

duce food with less shipping, handling and cooling, therefore with less energy, less pollution, less chemical use resulting in a cleaner environment.

The biggest hurdle for local food systems will be education. People have been taught that they can have anything they want, anytime they want it, for a price. Instead of eating New Zealand kiwis now and Chilean grapes in the winter, we should eat California grapes now and California kiwis in the winter. Everything has its time and season. If we learn this, we can eat healthy for less while protecting our local lands and economies.

For more information about our CSA go to RANCHOPIC-COLO.COM

Who is our Web Master?

Valley Land Alliance's web site is carefully tended to by Ross Avilla. We thought you might like to know a bit about Ross.

Ross grew up in Stevinson, California. He is the fourth generation of the Avilla family to live in Stevinson. After graduation from Hilmar High School he attended Cal State University, Stanislaus, and graduated with a degree in psychology. Ross re-

ceived the Metzger/Geiger Award, which is one of only two awards CSUS gives their students upon graduation for academic excellence.



Ross entered the doctoral program at the University of Davis in the fall of 2006 and is studying behavioral psychology. He has attended classes, works as a

teaching assistant, and is starting a research project. Somehow amongst all of his activities he manages to tend to our web site on a daily basis. Check out our web site at www.valleylandalliance.org and take a look at the great site that Ross keeps on track for us.

Grants

We are grateful to the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the Rose Foundation and the Community Foundation of Merced County which partially funded this newsletter. Thank You.

VLA Sponsors Livingston Town Hall Meetings

By Colette Alvernaz

Education and concern were the highlights of the two Livingston Town Hall meetings sponsored by Valley Land Alliance during the month of August. Coming together at the Veteran's Hall in Livingston, and later at Jean Okuye's home, residents saw power point presentations and listened intently to Merced County Farm Bureau Executive Director, Diana Westmoreland-Pedrozo, discussing issues of importance to their future.

The thrust of the meetings was to educate residents so that they could write informed letters commenting on the Proposed General Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report for the town of Livingston during the required 45 day public

comment period.



Livingston's residential growth based plan proposes to change almost 3,000 acres of agricultural land into mostly low density residential housing units. The plan calls for an increase in population for Livingston from almost 14,000

to 100,000 people in less than 20 years.

Concerns being discussed were availability of water; congestion of roads; no plan in place for agriculture; increased fees for residents for sewer, police and fire protection; business services that are not planned within walking or biking distances from residential areas; an imbalance of residential housing compared to retail and industrial areas; and the ever increasing footprint of valley towns on the Central Valley of California's farmland.

Residents coming together to raise a collective voice of concern made these town hall meetings a very important part of the Livingston General Plan process.

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Livingston Town Hall Meeting



Livingston Resident Gerry Martin



VLA President Jean Okuye



Merced Farm Bureau Director Diana Westmorland-Pedrozo

New Towns? *continued from page 1*

American Farmland Trust has reported that in Merced County, 318 % of its growth until the year 2020 which has been proposed for the cities in Merced County, can fit into the current individual town's sphere of influence. There is no need for new towns when existing city boundaries can fit that kind of growth. Land outside of these boundaries can and should be saved for future food production.

When one stop light now costs 2 million dollars and the costs of roads have skyrocketed because of the price of oil, one must stop and wonder if the Villages of Laguna San Luis, or any other grand scaled new town, can get beyond the stage of lots of houses planted in the outback of the county. Can they overcome their tremendous costs to become full



fledge towns one day, or will they sit half built, baking in the sun, fighting for water for their residents? Are new towns good planning for a sustainable future for agriculture and our valley's current residents? Or, are they pie in the sky dreams that are doomed to failure before their vision can become a reality.

Action *continued from page 2*

This connection of urban and rural people will continue, as we are presently planning for our first sister high school (Livingston and Palo Alto High Schools) event.

Also in May we participated and were a sponsor of the Pick and Gather Heartland Festival event in

Livingston, where about 500 attended to enjoy and learn about the wonderful Central Valley.

We look forward to working with you all to save our quality of life and preserve our agriculture in this wonderful valley.

We recommend citizens participate in local land use decisions.

As Bill Moyer said (In These Times July 11, 08) "Democracy only works when ordinary people claim it as their own."



Valley Land Alliance

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Feel Free to Cut Out

Become a member of Valley Land Alliance today! Membership donations are:

___ \$15 Student

___ \$50 Family

___ \$25 Individual

___ \$100 We give you a gift!

Checks can be mailed

to:

Valley Land Alliance

P.O. Box 102

Cressey, CA 95312

Or pay by credit card

online at: <http://www.valleylandalliance.org>