

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

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

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 5



WINTER 2008

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Hilmar Strives to Keep Urban Footprint in Check

By Roberta Avilla

Few home foreclosure signs litter the lawns in Hilmar, the schools are thriving, businesses are not closing, and only a few new smaller subdivisions have altered the land-

scape over the last twenty years.

While Merced, Delhi, Los Banos, Livingston, Gustine and other Merced County towns have seen boom, and a subsequent bust in their local economies, Hilmar has remained a stable reminder that a farming community can retain its rural heritage and still thrive.

Hilmar completed their new updated General Plan, with the help of Merced County Planner Robert King, with virtually no conflict. Their plan will take them into the year 2025 with a

population growth of just 5,000 more people, which is a stark contrast to the plan currently under consideration in Livingston.

Since Hilmar has kept residential growth steady and slow their local town boards and councils, such as the Hilmar/Stevinson MAC (municipal advisory council) and the Hilmar Water District Board, are made up of longtime Hil-

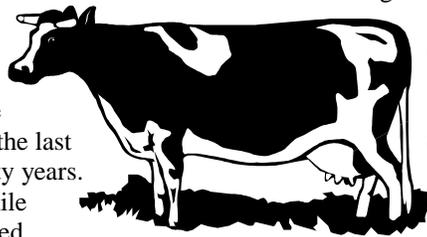
mar residents. Those serving on these boards appear to have a clear view of the town's historical agricultural heritage. This has enabled the boards of authority to have a more cohesive view of what they wish for their town's future.

The updated Hilmar Community Plan calls for a mixed use core which will be efficient for residents on both sides of Hwy 165 (Lander Avenue), which is the main thoroughfare through

town. Residents chose, and were granted by the county, the plan with the least amount of new residential growth. Senior housing is being planned for Hilmar as well.

The largest local business, Hilmar Cheese, is owned and operated by families who have lived in Hilmar for generations. The town itself has a mix of retail and food related businesses, most of which are locally owned and operated. Outlying dairies, farms, ranches and ag related businesses make up the rest of the local economy. This stability has aided in Hilmar's ongoing health and optimism for their future.

Hilmar can and should serve as a model of a small town that has chosen to keep its growth conservative, and yet seems to thrive when other faster growing towns are suffering from the downturn in our economy.



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Valley Land Alliance in Action

September

- Participated and sponsored a Slow Food Event at Cal State Stanislaus. Speaker Joel Salatin who is featured in Omnivore's Dilemma, 300 attended.
- Spoke at Merced County Board of Supervisors meeting opposing "New Town" near San Luis Reservoir.

- Participated in Merced County General Plan Update Focus Groups.
- Spoke at Los Banos City Council meeting requesting more study on 957 acre request for annexation of farmland for more mostly low density housing.
- Met with Merced Irrigation District to learn more about water

issues.

- Attended One Voice.

October

- Sponsored League of Women Voters for candidates night, 69 attended

Action continued on page 5



President Jean Okuye

Great Gift Idea!!!!

Sign up a friend or relative to be part of VLA . Not only will they receive a newsletter addressing current issues, they'll also be part of a worthwhile cause.

President's Message

The heat's on! What challenging times! Where's the WATER? As George Santoyana (1863-1952) said "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it"

Remember Mono Lake, Owens Valley? Taking of water from Owens and Mono basins to the City of Los Angeles has both environmental and social conse-

quences. Dorothy Green's book "Managing Water... Avoiding Crisis in California," is an eye opener of water history. She states many residents of these eastern Sierra Communities are grateful to the city for purchasing most of the land in the region as there is very little development and billboards on Hwy 395. Others wish for more people and development. This diversion of water has created dust storms which degrade the region's air quality. Mono Lake's water level, through law suits, has restricted water diversions; however, the city has not been meeting court-ordered deadlines and has been sued to force compliance. Mrs. Green says each of the sources of water on which the Los Angeles Area is dependent is oversubscribed, and most of the sources have water quality problems.

With all systems connected the issues must be addressed by the entire state.

What a shock to learn from Mrs. Green's book that three huge multinational corporations dominate the water business: Vivendi Environmental of France, now call Veolia

Environnement (also owner of Universal Movie Studios), Ondeo, formerly Suez Lyonnaise des Equx of France and RWE of Germany, which also owns the largest British and American water companies, Thames Water and American Water Works Company. Enron had a water marketing subsidiary called Azurix.

According to Mrs. Green, elected officials are loath to raise water rates to pay for ever-stricter water quality regulations. Some are finding it easier to be wooed by giant corporations who dangle a big buyout check in front of them and promise not to increase water rates--- for a time.

She refers to Reason Public Policy Institute Policy Brief 17 (2001) which states about 15% of city utilities are turning to private firms for technical management. Once the system has been purchased or management services contracted for, there is no guarantee that rates will stay low or that the system will be managed for the health and welfare of those it serves.

Mrs. Green gives an example near our Central Valley: Chualar, population 1,440, mostly Latinos, amidst lettuce fields in Monterey County. Their water bills had

been a flat **\$21/mo until the takeover, then their bills soared to between \$200 and \$430/mo.** The school monthly bill increased from **\$180/mo to \$2,753, to serve 300 students!** This report can be found in "Thirsty for Justice: A Peoples' Blueprint for California Water, June 2005 .

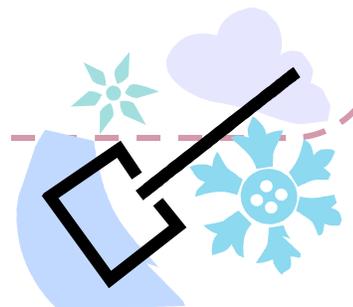
When I hear at Livingston City Council meetings that the rates haven't been changed for many years and the city can't get grants to finish replacing old pipes because the State says their rates aren't high enough to maintain the newly replaced

pipes, I wonder if this city could be tempted to be bought. I, for one, agree with Mrs. Green; privatization and water marketing raise serious questions about the ethics of buying and selling a public resource for profit. Water is a limited resource which must be protected for the future health and

sustainability of all the people.

Mrs. Green believes there is enough water for our growing population, for agriculture, and to restore much of our ecosystems decimated by water transfers. For more information on 16 elements she has developed go to www.c-win.org.

We wish you all a happy wet holiday season and new year.



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.

Farming Heritage

From the Desk of Merced County Board of Supervisor John Pedrozo



For as long as I can remember, farming has been a big part of my life. I truly feel blessed to be apart of the agricultural machine that feeds the world. As I ride my tractor or change my water, I often reflect upon our region's proud heritage and my own family's commitment to agriculture.

As a farmer, I know firsthand how difficult times can be. We face incredible burdens and challenges. To keep our standing as the breadbasket that feeds the globe, we must remain mindful of the types of challenges we face.

For example, water is a precious resource that each farmer and rancher depends upon. But

unfortunately, for too many years, our water has been sent down south to fill swimming pools. We must do more to capture our water so that our crops can be sufficiently fed.

Another example of agriculture being under siege is the recent announcement by the Governor's office to do away with the Williamson Act altogether. In my mind, this is both uncalled for and incredibly unwarranted. This recent announcement of course comes on the heels of the state's decision last year to cut the program by 10%.

Long story short, if we don't stand up to these types of aggres-

sions, we will pay the price for many years to come. We should come together and say no to Sacramento politicians who believe that food is grown in the grocery store and have no understanding that it is because of the hard work, dedication, commitment and investment of farmers and ranchers that they have food to eat in the first place.

Together, we can grow our agricultural economy and protect the heritage we all keep close to our hearts. But, we must stand together.

Ag, our Calling Card

By Roberta Avilla

Merced County covers 1,984 square miles and is only 80 square miles smaller than the state of Delaware. With over 110 different agricultural products growing on approximately 1.1 million acres of farm and rangeland in the county, agriculture is the economic base of the county.

In reading the report, "Merced County Agriculture", created by Maxwell Norton, county farm advisor from the UC Cooperative Extension office, one can learn a great deal about the biggest economic engine of Merced County.

This quote from Norton's report gives an assessment about the true monetary value of Merced County agriculture, "Agriculture, as with any basic industry, generates most of its wealth after the product leaves the farm gate. Goods and services are purchased by the

farmer from a wide variety of enterprises, which in turn purchase from others. The largest multiplier of economic growth is in the form of packing, processing, packaging, transporting and marketing agricultural products. If one were to assume an economic multiplier factor of 3.0 for Merced County, then one can assume that the over 2.2 billion dollar gross farm gate value generates more than 6.6 billion dollars of economic growth for the local economy."

One point cannot be stressed enough from this data, Merced County farmers are excellent at what they do, and the fruits of their labors are shared by many, if not most in the county.

In this era of talk about "branding" areas in order to draw business and tourist dollars, why can't agriculture become Merced

County's brand? Why don't we see our city council leaders and county supervisors planning for success for agriculture instead of approving projects that are outdated and which create a draw on the natural resources that their chief economic generator needs to exist, namely land and water?

We need for our city and county leaders to start thinking progressively. Merced County Supervisors could form an ag and environmental resources commission that they meet with on a monthly basis; which is a practice that other counties have done successfully.

Agriculture is finding a need to comply with stricter and stricter environmental standards. This will bring about new industry that will create products for that purpose.

Card continued on page 6



Spotlight on Sam Cafe

By Robby Avilla

"I consider health when I cook. I stay away from cooking with oil and instead cook with chicken broth. I support local farmers and use their produce for my food when I can."

Sam Malaythong traveled to Merced years ago. He made regular trips from Los Angeles to help the local Hmong community with his translation skills. Whenever he came to Merced he remembered that he longed for a place to sit down and eat a good meal of Thai food. He also noticed the quiet country atmosphere of the area that he remembered from his homeland, and missed so much by living in Los Angeles.

After the Vietnam war ended over 60,000 Laotians settled in California and their numbers have steadily grown. Immigrants in the San Joaquin Valley include ethnic Lao and Hmong, a tribal people of southern Chinese origins, who farmed the rugged mountain regions of eastern Laos. Lao cuisine is the cuisine of the Lao ethnic group of Laos and Northeast Thailand. Lao food has many regional variations because their dishes depend heavily on the locally grown fresh foods from each distinct region. The food is traditionally grilled, boiled, stewed, steamed and seared. It is exceptionally healthy because it contains a large quantity of fresh raw greens, vegetables and herbs.

Sam had held many jobs before he finally made the move to Merced with his family. He attended Cal State Fullerton and was the president of the Laotian Student Association of Los Angeles. He pursued social service work; worked for Catholic charities aid for refugees, where he did translation work on behalf of the Hmong and



Laotian communities; and even worked in a Beverly Hills restaurant.

In 1991 Sam made the move from Los Angeles to Merced where he opened the Star Garden Restaurant and operated it until 2001. The time was not right in the Merced community for a restaurant featuring traditional Thai food. Sam said, "People didn't know Thai food, they knew Chinese, but not Thai. Laotians want their food fresh so it takes a long time to prepare the dishes. Because the food requires so much labor to create, few restaurants serve true Laotian food and people in this area were just not used to it."

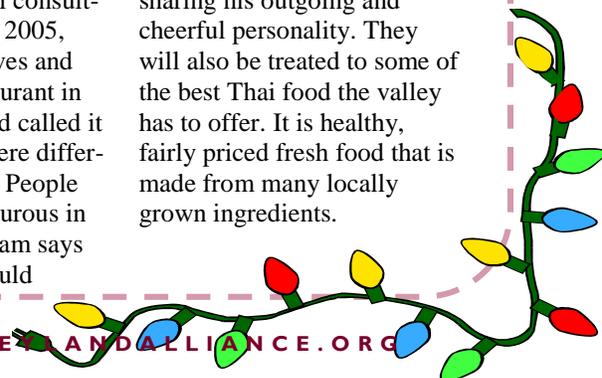
Sam took a break from the restaurant business and worked as a financial consultant. Then in August, 2005, he rolled up his sleeves and opened another restaurant in the same location and called it Sam Cafe. Things were different this time around. People became more adventurous in their eating habits. Sam says he knew the area would

change with UC Merced coming into the community. "I knew the area would grow, just knew it. I worked on my menu and have created fusion food. It is authentic Thai food with my original added touches and everyone seems to enjoy it." And, enjoy it they have. The UC Merced students have found Sam Cafe and made it a favorite of theirs. Sam is proud of his healthy menu stating, "I consider health when I cook. I stay away from cooking with oil and instead cook with chicken broth. I support local farmers and use their produce for my food when I can."

Visitors to Sam Cafe, located at 235 W. 12th Street in Merced, will see Sam cooking, visiting with guests and sharing his outgoing and cheerful personality. They will also be treated to some of the best Thai food the valley has to offer. It is healthy, fairly priced fresh food that is made from many locally grown ingredients.

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.



From the Editor's Desk

By Nicole Alvernaz

It's the holiday season, a time when people tend to get nostalgic and reminisce about bygone days.

When I was a senior in high school I spent some time listening to my Grandpa, Sweet Potato Joe, tell his stories. I recorded them so they wouldn't be completely lost forever.

I learned a lot that year, more than I realized at the time. I learned about honor, integrity, and the way things used to be. It made me realize how different my childhood was compared to Grandpa's.

Grandpa has a saying, "The only thing constant in life is change." Recently there seems to have been quite a bit of change, nationwide with our economy and locally with General Plan updates. And it seems when change happens misconception multiplies.

One of my favorite Grandpa Joe stories is when the baseball field needed to be replanted. Grandpa didn't ask permission, and he didn't go door to door fundraising, he just took

problem. He even spread manure for fertilizer and stunk up the whole town. The odd thing was, no one complained.

Maybe people then were just more used to the unpleasant smells of life. Could you imagine if a city smelled like manure today, the number of phone calls that would be made to City Hall? It's easy to be misled and hate the unknown.

People need to be taught, they need to hear the stories of toil and laughter; farming needs to be brought to life.

In many of Grandpa's tales there's a subtle hero, flirting with the lime-light, Sweet Potato Flo, my Grandma. Grandma used to say that when Grandpa died she was going to bury him under home plate, because he spent so much time at the ball field. She got up every morning before dawn for over 50 years to get the newspaper and the coffee going before Grandpa headed out to the field. And when she got sick, Grandpa was there everyday for her for close to nine years.

These are the tales that inspire; they move us. How can people who haven't lived on a farm know the importance of ag if they're never told?

This holiday season, tell them. Share the tales; tell your parents,

grandparents, friends,

neighbors, aunts, uncles and cousins about stories from your childhood, or even last week. Without them there is no history to learn from.

If I hadn't spent that year at Grandpa's feet I wouldn't have known about the town rabbit hunts. Or that Grandpa accidentally burned down a drop as a boy. (A drop controls the flow of water into a lower part of the canal). Or about the winds which blew so hard and so long they destroyed the crop.

I wouldn't have known that the man I grew up knowing as Sweet Potato Joe swore he would never come back and farm.

I also wouldn't have gotten the first hand glimpse of the honor and integrity this man I call Grandpa had before I was born.

If you're tired of the ignorance people have about farming and farmers, the power is in your hands. If the only constant in life is change, as agriculturists we can have a hand in changing the misconception and fear.

This holiday season take up the mantle and pass down the heritage.

"Grandpa has a saying, 'The only thing constant in life is change'."



Action *continued from page 1*

- Started dialogue for Urban/Rural High School Student Organization (Livingston and Palo Alto High Schools).
- Participated in Merced County One Voice, a lobbying group of concerned people.
- Attended Land Summit workshop in Sacramento, "Collaborating on Common Ground".
- Gave presentation to Sierra Club in Modesto.
- Attended Asthma Coalition

meeting in Merced.

- Attended California Pan Ethnic Health Network workshop in Fresno, "Planning for Healthy Communities". Land use was main speaker's topic.
- Met with professor from UC Merced who requested participation in panel discussion of the book, "Omnivore's Dilemma", which is required reading for incoming students.
- Spoke at Livingston City Council meeting on General Plan

Update and Final Environmental Impact Report.

- Participated in Panel Discussion at UC Merced on Oct 31st. We also passed out our hand-out to all the students.

November

- Participated in Merced County General Plan Update workshops in Delhi and Hilmar. Had booth with powerpoint at Hunger Task Force, 70 attended.





Web News

We have two new additions to our web site. We now have a monthly editorial written by local residents. In September we featured a poem from Hilmar resident Glenn Anderson. October's editorial is written by Katherine Schell from Livingston. Her editorial is entitled,

"Cheap Ag Land?"

We have also included the current water levels of the daily reservoir storage summary from the California Department of Water Resources. You only need to click on the link on our news page to find the most current information. The statistics are stagger-

ing. We suggest you take a look.

You can access our web site by going to www.valleylandalliance.org It is updated daily and has the latest news for anyone interesting in valley farmland issues.

Card *continued from page 3*

We need those industries to know that Merced County welcomes them with open arms. We need to clearly send a message to any kind of business that agriculture is in need of, saying, "Come, we will foster you and help you start a successful business in our county."

We can create farmland experiences that mirror those of the wine tours of Napa valley that have made it such a successful and enterprising area of our state. People can

go on a farmland trail weekend where they taste, witness and delight in all that our beautiful farms have to offer. Let's create an incredible experience right here in our county for those people who have lost touch with the rural lifestyle. We can house them with bed and breakfast inns, feed them local foods and have farms open for great experiences.

It truly is possible to have it all with proper and intelligently thought out planning: a local economy with

plenty of good paying jobs, safe natural resources for our native wildlife, a healthy lifestyle for our citizens, productive and sustainable farms, and a county where our children are safe and have their parents living and working near them in their formative years.

Merced County feeds the world. It is time to take hold of that truth and make it our calling card.

Valley Land Alliance

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