



Land Use & Housing Committee

November 25, 2009

RUCS Land Use Topic Summary

Issue: The working paper and working group process for the RUCS Land Use topic have been completed and staff is beginning to summarize the findings in preparation for a workshop with the SACOG Board in January.

Recommendation: None, this item is for information only.

Discussion: Over the last year, SACOG staff and RUCS consultants have been writing working papers and engaging stakeholders in workshops for the transportation, land use, and local market topics of the RUCS project. Working papers on current conditions and innovations to address challenges and promote opportunities were drafted by the RUCS team and posted to the RUCS wiki for review by stakeholders. Workshops also offered stakeholders an opportunity to provide feedback via exercises designed around the issues addressed in the papers. While the majority of the workshops focused on one topic, the last two workshops covered multiple topics and included exercises designed to facilitate discussions about how topics are linked.

The land use topic identified current challenges to economic viability and environmental sustainability in our rural areas as well as existing and potential opportunities to support rural sustainability. One of the key challenges to agricultural uses in particular is the conflict with nearby non-agricultural operations, at both the rural-urban edge and in the middle of rural areas. Another challenge is in the limitations of local land use regulations to foster economic development potential of agri-tourism and ag-industry. The Sacramento region's current rural land use policies demonstrate a desire to preserve agriculture, habitat, and open space within our region. Our research, including local and national literature reviews, interviews with local jurisdictions and stakeholder engagement, that additional innovative land use programs are available to bolster the viability and sustainability of rural lands. An overview of the challenges and opportunities is included in the attached summary of the working paper. Staff would like the committee's input on the challenges and opportunities identified in the working paper.

Going forward, staff will be using the working papers and workshop feedback to craft white papers for committee and board review. Those papers will be presented to the board in a workshop tentatively planned for January. Staff will be seeking guidance from the committee and board on areas within each topic where staff should concentrate efforts to craft implementation strategies. Coupled with technical work, those strategies will be part of a "toolkit" that can assist with local economic viability and environmental sustainability efforts.

Approved by:

Mike McKeever
Executive Director

Attachment

Key Staff: Rebecca Sloan, Director of External Affairs & Member Services, (916) 340-6224
David Shabazian, Senior Planner, (916) 340-6231
Kacey Lizon, Senior Planner, (916) 340-6265

Rural Urban Connections Strategy Land Use Briefing Paper November 20, 2009

The land use topic aims to identify land use challenges to economic viability and environmental sustainability in our rural areas as well as existing and potential opportunities to support rural sustainability. These challenges and opportunities were identified through several sources including:

- review of local general plans and land use ordinances
- review state and national research on agricultural and open space land use issues
- interviews with local planning departments, agricultural commissioners, resource conservation districts, land trusts
- the input of the land use stakeholder group through four stakeholder workshops. The stakeholder group included representatives from local jurisdictions, cooperative extensions, farm bureaus, land trusts, landowners, environmental advocates, state resource and agricultural agencies, transportation agencies and others

Current Rural Land Use Conditions (Challenges)

When it comes to supporting farming, perhaps the most fundamental land use policy issues at the rural-urban interface is striking the balance between expansion of urban areas to support a growing population and supporting productive agricultural operations and/or important natural resources:

- All six counties have general plan policies that direct or limit urban growth to urban areas, community areas, or cities' spheres of influence. Yolo and Sutter counties have policies that are somewhat more restrictive than others.
- Right-to-Farm ordinances exist in every county yet agricultural commissioners regularly receive complaints from areas governed by Right-to-Farm ordinances.
- Buffer requirements exist in every county, though with varying distance requirements and have mixed success at minimizing conflict.
- Traffic conflicts between farming operations and rural housing development are exacerbated by rapid housing growth (and corresponding commute traffic) and agricultural traffic (including agri-tourism traffic).
- Transition zones between urban and rural uses are intended to minimize conflict between agriculture and urban uses; however, this has been one of the key issues raised by stakeholders around the region.

Transition Zones: The Urban-Rural Edge

Transition zones, or the line between rural and urban uses, are comprised of either a "hard" or "soft" edge in the Sacramento region. Both types of transition zones pose challenges and opportunities to agricultural viability:

Hard edge transitions are identified by an abrupt change from urban to rural uses, usually at a city limit or urban limit line.

- Parcel sizes on the rural side of a hard edge tend to be large and lands are usually zoned and designated for agricultural use.
- Urban development across from active farming can bring rise to complaints despite right-to-farm ordinances, and the presence of urban infrastructure near the large rural parcels contributes to development pressure.
- When supported by strong local policies, hard edge transitions provide some certainty that farm land will be preserved rather than encroached upon by development.

Soft edge transitions are identified by agricultural-residential or rural residential zones between urban land uses and agricultural parcels.

- Agricultural-residential/rural residential areas are generally identified by 1-10 acre lot sizes; residential is the primary use although some farming is also allowed.
- If used solely as home sites, they are difficult to serve with infrastructure and services because the per-unit cost of serving such areas is very high.
- Agricultural-residential/rural residential parcels are difficult to farm at a commodity scale, though small-scale farming is possible.
- Agricultural-residential/rural residential home sites comprised nearly 60 percent of the farmland lost or impacted in the region from 1988 to 2005.
- About 8 percent of the land in community areas and spheres of influence (areas targeted for future urban development) are committed in agricultural residential/rural residential use.

Land Use Policy and Program Innovations (Opportunities)

In this paper, land use policies and programs that support economic viability and/or environmental sustainability are referred to as innovations. The majority of land use innovations in practice in the region and nation are focused on protecting farmland and/or open space from conflict with other uses, whether this is at the rural-urban edge or with other rural uses (e.g. housing). Another group of land use innovations focuses on supporting economic development for land owners. These innovations are described in the following seven categories:

Policy boundaries are adopted by local governments to distinguish between urban from rural areas, or non-agricultural from agricultural areas. They guide infrastructure investment. Examples include:

- Urban growth boundaries designate the extent of urbanization for a period of 30 – 50+ years. They define a hard edge between urban and rural areas.
- Rural reserves designate lands for rural use for a period of 30 – 50+ years. This model is being testing in the Portland, Oregon region.
- Agricultural districts designate where farming is encouraged and protected from encroachment of other uses and may also be used to prioritize infrastructure investment and economic development.

Rural Housing Zoning Regulations limit the creation of rural ranchettes to areas of least conflict with farming operations, with the additional goal of maintaining large tracts of land for farming. Examples include:

- Special zoning on agricultural land that allows a small amount of land to be split off from a large parcel for the creation of an additional home site for family or employees. In exchange the remainder of the large parcel is protected from further subdivision.
- Criteria for approving ranchette subdivision to protect farming operations from potential conflict with nearby rural housing. Ranchette subdivision applications are evaluated against a list of criteria. If the application receives a certain number of points it can be recommended for approval to the Board of Supervisors.

Buffers to Minimize Ag-Non-Ag Conflicts are defined in this region by various distances – from as little as 300 feet to as much as 10 acres between uses.

- An urban edge agricultural park is a different kind of buffer that can be used for small-scale, usually organic farming. It could be located at the urban edge to provide a buffer between urban and rural land uses. Additional purposes include: providing business start-up opportunities for small farmers, direct market access for farmers, and educational opportunities for the public.

Infill and Revitalization of the Urban Area coupled with policies for open land preservation at the urban edge can relieve some of the development pressure on rural edge lands by opening up the market for development within the urban area.

Preserve Open Land for farming, habitat, other open space uses, or a combination of all of them. Examples include:

- ***Agricultural and Habitat Mitigation:*** In the fast-growing Sacramento region and greater the Central Valley, development mitigation for agricultural and habitat lands has been an important tool for land conservation.
- ***Agricultural Conservation Easements:*** Conservation easements are tools to conserve land for a variety of open space values, such as farming, habitat, flood control, water quality protection, or combinations of such values. Very few easement funding programs are available that expressly protect agricultural practices, with no restrictions on the type of farming. The two state and federal easement programs are exclusively for agricultural conservation – the California Farmland Conservancy Program and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. A local easement funding program in Davis also provides unrestricted funding for open space acquisitions in Yolo County.
- ***Habitat and Resource Conservation Easements:*** The bulk of easement funding programs that exist today are directed at habitat and resource conservation. Though they may and have been applied to agricultural land, they typically come with restrictions on farming practices to support the habitat or resource under consideration. These easements are usually funded by state and/or federal programs. There are several types of habitat and resource conservation programs used in the region.

Public-Private Collaboration between multiple jurisdictions or between private and public groups aims to address landscape-scale priorities and issues. Examples include:

- City-county agreements to plan for agriculture, such as Yolo County’s agreement with its cities to direct urbanization to cities. In exchange, Yolo County receives a portion of the tax increment the cities’ redevelopment districts.
- A regional open space collaborative is a formal cooperation between various public and private entities to develop a regional set of conservation priorities and strategies to leverage individual groups’ efforts (e.g. fundraising for conservation, conducting public education/awareness campaigns on the importance of open land). The Bay Area Open Space Council is one such regional collaborative, with land trust and local government members.

Economic Development or Relief tools provide economic development opportunities or tax relief to land owners to support them in keeping their land open. Examples include:

- Less restrictive zoning for on-site processing and sales, to allow uses that support agri-tourism (e.g. bed & breakfasts), or to allow ag-industrial activities such as energy or biomass production.
- Agricultural Resources Center: Sutter County Resource Conservation District (RCD) is pioneering this idea in Sutter County. The site will be a one-stop-shop for farmers seeking grants or loans for improving their operations or bottom line, help in navigating various permitting processing, and business training. Sutter RCD is partnering with federal agencies, cooperative extension, and the local community college so these entities can be located in one place for easier access by the county’s farmers.

The Sacramento region’s current rural land use policies demonstrate a desire to preserve agriculture, habitat, and open space within our region. Although there are many challenges to protecting these lands, development, both at the urban fringe and in areas of rural housing clusters, appears to pose the biggest land use-related challenge. With enough pressure from land use conflicts, farmers faced with encroaching development may have to change farming practices and in some cases to the extent that they may opt to stop farming altogether. At the same time, there are a number of policies and programs, some of which are in use in the region, which demonstrate the potential to support and protect agriculture and other open space uses.