

Open-space, habitat protection comes under review

By DON FRANCESdailydemocrat.com

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The Williamson Act, habitat restoration and other issues related to open space in Yolo County were the focus of discussion for county supervisors this week.

On the Williamson Act, the board voted unanimously to continue its use for another year under the extension known as AB 1265.

"Those of us in agriculture support it," said Frank Sieferman, speaking to the board on behalf of the Yolo County Taxpayers Association during Tuesday's meeting.

According to county deputy counsel Phil Pogledich, two-thirds of all Yolo County property -- about 400,000 acres -- is under contract through the Williamson Act.

California's counties once received reimbursements from the state for the lost tax revenue -- a kickback of about \$1 million per year in Yolo County. Then in 2009, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger eliminated the reimbursements.

AB1265 offers some of that money back to counties, and under it Yolo County now receives something south of \$500,000, Pogledich said.

At the board meeting, Pogledich led the Williamson Act discussion, noting, "This is the third time in the last three years that we've considered this program."

Under the latest proposed extension, he said, "farmers will still receive at least 90 percent of their tax benefits." The board will revisit the issue again in another year.

Pogledich also led a separate discussion on a two-year moratorium on certain habitat projects which expired earlier this month.

The moratorium was intended to halt habitat creation in Yolo County as mitigation for development projects outside the county.

Before the moratorium, developers elsewhere -- "It's been consistently Sacramento County," Pogledich said -- built projects there but set aside habitat in Yolo County as mitigation for the projects. That led to limits on agricultural use wherever the habitats were created.

So a moratorium was passed to stop the trend. However, "It's now expired, and we're now back to the point of considering whether a mitigation ordinance or some other approach is appropriate," Pogledich told supervisors.

This issue "also has a long history before the board," he said. Yet "by and large," the reasons for considering a new ordinance haven't changed.

Pogledich suggested that he "return to the board on Dec. 4 with an ordinance that you can consider for adoption."

Supervisor Jim Provenza said he was "very much in agreement with doing an ordinance."

"If we're doing mitigation for a project when the economic benefit is outside of Yolo County," then the reason for allowing the mitigation must be closely considered, he said.