

Farmland preserve program up for reconsideration

By DON FRANCES

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Supervisors had a lively discussion Tuesday on Yolo County's policies when it comes to preserving farmland.

The subject came up due to a proposed study on agricultural mitigation. Currently, Yolo County requires projects that take up farmland "to mitigate the loss of agricultural resources by preserving farmland of like or better quality on at least an acre-for-acre basis," according to a staff report.

That one-to-one ratio -- one acre preserved for every acre lost -- could be increased if the county chooses to change its policy. For example, a developer might have to preserve two or more acres of farmland for every one being used, depending on the quality of the soil or other factors.

The study -- to be conducted by Hausrath Economics Group at a cost \$65,000 -- is meant to help county officials sort out those options. It could also help the county in court, should a developer decide to sue over its mitigation policies.

The study, said Senior Deputy County Counsel Phil Pogledich, could "position the county to successfully defend a lawsuit if challenged."

In that way its need is "twofold," he said: to answer the legal question of whether a higher mitigation ratio could survive a lawsuit, and to "drive the policy" that follows.

Supervisors spoke with passion on the issue of preserving agricultural land, with Jim Provenza stating that someday "We are going to be facing some pretty serious shortages of farmland, and that Yolo County is one of the counties that's held the line."

"I think in the future we will be an example for the state and the nation," he said.

To those who would fight against the county's mitigation policies, Provenza said, "Don't ask us to give up our fundamental lifeblood because you don't want to participate in the program." The one-to-one ratio, he said, should be a "floor not a ceiling."

But Supervisor Matt Rexroad was concerned that implementing "the highest standard in California" could lead to a "difficult legal battle."

Rexroad said preserving farmland is "far more to me about the quality not the quantity," including the location of the land. He also seemed to feel the current policies were effective,

saying that "We're protecting a lot of land in Yolo County that has absolutely no chance of being developed in my lifetime."

Quality of the farmland in question was already on the minds of fellow supervisors, with Provenza saying that "prime farmland would probably be subjected to a higher mitigation ratio than non-prime farmland."

Supervisor Don Saylor noted that the city of Davis already has studied the issue, coming up with a "tiered mitigation strategy that gave greater weight to" certain land depending on its quality and location. He also said the board should look at "more promising ag mitigation processes in other parts of the country."

Supervisor Mike McGowan made the point that Yolo County is not always in control of its own destiny -- the state's Bay Delta Conservation Plan, for example, could take up thousands of acres of county farmland -- making it wise to learn more about the mitigation issue.

Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, the board's farmer, agreed that soil quality makes all the difference to a plot's value as farmland. Although he said he was "reluctant" to spend so much on a study, he agreed to support the resolution.

The board agreed to the study on a 4-1 vote, with Rexroad opposed.