



**Contra  
Costa  
County**

To: Board of Supervisors  
From: Mary N. Piepho, District III Supervisor  
Date: December 20, 2016

Subject: Allocation of Funds from the Livable Communities Trust to Develop Recommendations on Agricultural Land Use Policy

**RECOMMENDATION(S):**

1. AUTHORIZE the Department of Conservation and Development (DCD), in consultation with the Contra Costa County Agriculture Advisory Task Force and local agricultural stakeholders, to review existing land use regulations (e.g., General Plan policies and zoning) and identify for future Board consideration specific actions the County could take to further promote and incentivize agricultural sustainability and economic vitality; and
2. APPROVE the expenditure of up to \$150,000 from the Livable Communities Trust (District III Portion) for this purpose, as recommended by Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

None to the General Fund. Up to \$150,000 from the Livable Communities Trust (District III portion) will be allocated toward the effort.

**BACKGROUND:**

Agriculture has historically been an important part of Contra Costa County's economy and culture, with agricultural

☒ APPROVE

☐ OTHER

☒ RECOMMENDATION OF CNTY ADMINISTRATOR

☐ RECOMMENDATION OF BOARD COMMITTEE

Action of Board On: **12/20/2016** ☒ APPROVED AS RECOMMENDED ☐ OTHER

Clerks Notes:

**VOTE OF SUPERVISORS**

AYE: John Gioia, District I  
Supervisor  
Candace Andersen, District II  
Supervisor  
Mary N. Piepho, District III  
Supervisor  
Karen Mitchoff, District IV  
Supervisor

ABSENT: Federal D. Glover, District V  
Supervisor

I hereby certify that this is a true and correct copy of an action taken and entered on the minutes of the Board of Supervisors on the date shown.

ATTESTED: December 20, 2016

David Twa, County Administrator and Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

By: Stephanie Mello, Deputy

Contact: TOMI RILEY,  
925-252-4500

cc:



## BACKGROUND: (CONT'D)

activities dating back to the Spanish colonial period. Good soils, a mild climate, and adequate water supplies allowed agriculture to become a principal element of the county's economy. However, the agricultural sector began a steady decline following World War II, as tens of thousands of acres of productive agricultural land were converted to accommodate urban and suburban growth.

Understanding the impact of development pressures on agricultural resources, in 1978 the Board of Supervisors established the Agricultural Core ("Ag Core") as part of the newly-adopted East County Area General Plan (see Note 1). The Ag Core included 14,600 acres of farmland that were the most capable of supporting and sustaining agricultural production because the soils were considered the best for farming a wide variety of plants or crops. These soils were rated as "Prime Farmland" through a soil survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resource Conservation Service). Additionally, the Ag Core is identified as Prime Farmland through the Farmland Monitoring and Mapping Program administered by the California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resources Protection (see Attachment A, Contra Costa County Important Farmland Map 2014 and Note 2).

In 1990 Contra Costa voters approved Measure C, which among other things established the County's Urban Limit Line and resulted in the County rezoning the Ag Core to require 40-acre minimum parcel sizes where 10-acres had been the previous minimum.

Unfortunately, the years immediately preceding Measure C's adoption saw a spike in subdivision applications within the Ag Core, which resulted in creation of numerous parcels that are undersized by today's zoning standards. These parcels are often developed as estate lots or other non-agricultural uses and may not easily lend themselves to economically-viable agricultural enterprises due to their size.

Despite public and private efforts to preserve the county's productive agricultural land over the past several decades, from 1984 through 2014 Prime Farmland decreased from 41,181 to 25,502 acres and Important Farmland decreased from 116,148 to 88,912 acres (see Note 3). Prime Farmland within the Ag Core itself has decreased from 14,600 acres to approximately 11,500 acres since the Ag Core's inception.

Despite the decrease in agricultural acreage, agriculture is still an important element of the Contra Costa County economy. In 2015 agriculture contributed \$225 million and provided 2,277 jobs (1,735 direct and 542 indirect/supporting) (see Note 4). The \$128.5 million gross value of the county's agricultural production ranked 38th out of the 56 California counties submitting crop reports in 2015 and 6th out of the 9 Bay Area counties (see Note 5).

While Contra Costa's agricultural production may be small compared to the \$3.23 billion production of San Joaquin County, it is nearly three times larger than the agricultural production of neighboring Alameda County. Local initiatives such as Buy Fresh, Buy Local and Harvest Time in Brentwood have increased awareness of Contra Costa's agricultural

resources and products, but its agricultural tourism (“agritourism”) industry lags behind Alameda County’s relative to the size of its agricultural economy. In part this is because Alameda County has adopted a clear vision for its most prominent agricultural area, the South Livermore Valley, and successfully worked with the cities of Livermore and Pleasanton and local stakeholders, like the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association, to leverage its agricultural resources. Contra Costa County can learn from and build upon Alameda County’s experience.

Food production has also become an issue of intense public interest in recent years. Across the nation people have become increasingly aware of their food sources and production practices. Organically farmed and farm-to-table, concepts which were somewhat obscure a just decade ago, are now mainstream and commonly factor into consumer choices. Therefore, it is important that Contra Costa County farms remain an economically-viable local food source.

The District III Supervisor has consistently engaged with the agricultural community over the last twelve years to hear their thoughts on the future of agriculture, including convening town hall style meetings, participating in forums and conferences and engaging with individual farmers and other interested people at numerous other meetings and events. Farmers in Contra Costa County value our agricultural tradition and want to see it continue, but they also feel strongly that opportunities to promote economic vitality for agriculture need to be identified and pursued.

With these considerations in mind, the District III Supervisor recommends that the full Board authorize DCD, in consultation with the Agricultural Advisory Task Force and stakeholders in the local agricultural community, to identify for future Board consideration specific actions the County could take to further promote and incentivize agricultural sustainability and economic vitality. These could include, but are not limited to:

- Researching on how programs to promote agricultural sustainability and economic vitality have been developed and funded throughout California, including agritourism, agricultural marketing opportunities and efforts to make agriculture more sustainable.
- Reviewing the County General Plan and zoning ordinance to identify changes necessary to promote the economic vitality and sustainability of agriculture.
- Reviewing current permitting procedures for agricultural projects to identify opportunities for streamlining and removing barriers in order to promote the economic sustainability of agricultural uses.
- Review policies and programs to identify opportunities for complementing improved economic vitality with retention of the agricultural land and productivity necessary to drive a sustainable and vital agricultural economy.

Completing the actions described above will require considerable staff resources. Extensive

public outreach and engagement will be necessary. Amendments to the County General Plan and zoning ordinance are subject to review under the California Environmental Quality Act and must go through a series of public hearings. The District III Supervisor therefore recommends allocating \$150,000 from the District III portion of deposits into the Livable Communities Trust Fund to DCD to cover staff time and other costs.

The Livable Communities Trust Fund (Fund) was established to implement the County's Smart Growth Action Plan. Goals of the Action Plan relevant to this proposal are the following: 3) to promote innovative land use planning and design principles that encourage mixed use and infill development (this proposal is to study innovative land use planning and is intended to improve the sustainability of agricultural lands and reduce pressure to convert such lands to urban uses, thereby enabling a focus on mixed use and infill development in existing urban areas; and 4) promote economic revitalization and urban infill communities (this proposal is intended to promote the agricultural economy).

In reviewing the purpose of the Fund, the Board of Supervisors determined on December 3, 2013 that "the goal shall be to spend the money equally among supervisorial districts." At build-out of the development projects contributing revenue to the Fund, deposits to the Fund will total \$8,448,000. The interest-bearing trust account has earned over \$300,000 in interest to date. So far, one expenditure has been made from the Fund (a \$250,000 expenditure approved on October 22, 2013 for the Northern Waterfront Economic Development Initiative). Another expenditure was authorized on June 14, 2016, with \$1,432,830 from the District I portion providing matching funds for the development of the Heritage Point affordable housing project in North Richmond. An additional proposal to authorize expenditure of up to \$250,000 from the District III portion is on the December 20 agenda for a feasibility study for the Marsh Creek Corridor Multi-Use Trail.

#### CONSEQUENCE OF NEGATIVE ACTION:

If the funding is not allocated resources will not be available to the County to study and develop policies to improve agricultural sustainability and profitability.

#### CHILDREN'S IMPACT STATEMENT:

The recommended action will not affect children's programs in the County.