

Riverbank council to consider rules for ag preservation

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Riverbank leaders will join a larger debate over how much cities should charge developers when replacing farmland with homes or businesses.

The Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission, which rules on cities' requests when they want to grow, is providing the stage for discussing farmland preservation. The commission has asked cities for input, and the Riverbank City Council will take up the issue Tuesday.

LAFCO in 2012 adopted rules requiring that cities have preservation policies such as permanently preserving farmland in other locations, or charging fees toward that end. Other options include voter-approved urban limits.

When Patterson in the fall proposed charging developers \$2,000 an acre, critics scoffed, saying that amount isn't nearly enough. The Central Valley Farmland Trust says the average going price for conservation easements is \$7,100 per acre.

LAFCO, composed of elected leaders from Stanislaus County and some of its cities, is considering setting the minimum at 35 percent of the average price paid in five comparable land deals, plus a 5 percent endowment.

Riverbank should oppose that "troubling" idea, says a staff report going before the City Council on Tuesday. If approved, the rule could:

- "Drive up already inflated costs for acquiring conservation easements" and "send a signal to farm owners to maintain artificially high prices," the report says.
- "Deter future growth of the city" and "signal greater development in unincorporated areas (where) developers would not have to pay the fees." Cities could miss out on the revenue that comes with new growth, the report says. It doesn't mention that voters throughout the county a few years ago outlawed subdivisions in unincorporated areas without voter approval.
- Decrease city leaders' traditional authority over land use decisions. Cities should have freedom to figure out how they want to go about saving farmland, the report says.

Riverbank's land area increased 8 percent in the past decade – second to lowest in terms of percentage growth among Stanislaus cities. Patterson, which grew 135 percent in 10 years, led the way, and Newman, which added no acreage, was last.

LAFCO will consider input from Riverbank and the county's eight other cities at a 6 p.m. meeting March 25 in the basement chamber at Tenth Street Place, 1010 10th St., Modesto.

Also Tuesday, the Riverbank council will hear presentations on low-impact developing and on Pacific Gas and Electric Co. pipelines.

Tuesday's council meeting starts at 6 p.m. at 6707 Third St., Riverbank. For more information, go to www.bit.ly/1x1ZAaM.

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