



TODAY'S EDITORIAL

Community Matters: Battle continues to preserve agriculture lands

by Gail Marshall

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Once again, there is a threat to the long-term viability of our agricultural lands.

On Oct. 13, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors will hear a request to approve a large number of so-called "special events," year after year, on the rural, ag-zoned Crossroads property on Foxen Canyon Road.

This request, if approved, will set a terrible precedent, and it should be denied by the Board of Supervisors.

The majority of these "special events" are simply "parties for profit," such as weddings, conventions and concerts, that have nothing at all to do with the agricultural use of the property.

These "special events" should not be confused with the existing right of owners of rural properties to use them occasionally for fundraisers, family weddings or large parties for friends. In contrast, requests for permission to hold large parties for profit in perpetuity are clear attempts to turn our rural lands into commercial entertainment venues.

People in residentially zoned areas are not allowed to compromise zoning ordinances and change the nature of their neighborhoods by continually renting out their properties for parties. It should not be allowed on ag lands, either.

The relationship of the events to the agricultural use of the property is a critical point. There is an obvious agricultural benefit to an annual Pumpkin Festival on a pumpkin farm, or a Christmas event at a Christmas tree farm. Visitor-serving uses like vegetable stands, pick-your-own fruit, and wine tasting have clear relationships to agriculture.

Santa Barbara County land use policies and zoning ordinances have been crafted with this principle in mind. Important tests must be met prior to approval of requests for non-agricultural uses of ag-zoned properties.

AG-II zoning rules clearly state, "The intent is to preserve these lands for long term agricultural use." In order to ensure this preservation, land use codes require that approval of non-agricultural uses must be found to be "incidental" to the agricultural use of the property.

Otherwise, the addition of non-ag uses effectively becomes a de facto rezoning of the property to commercial zoning.

For the Crossroads property, no rational argument can be made that the requested number and type of events on the Crossroads property are “incidental” to the ag use. Economically, the events business is 10 to 20 times more lucrative than the agriculture.

This also sets a bad precedent for other ag-zoned lands. If it is acceptable in this case, then why not on all other ag-zoned properties in the Santa Ynez Valley? Why not also on the Gaviota coast or the Carpinteria foothills?

This request also drives up the value of the agricultural lands so those serious about farming simply cannot afford to buy or lease land whose prices have been driven up by the de facto rezoning.

Another serious problem is the interference of the public events with necessary agricultural activities that produce noise, dust and pesticide drift. Does the wedding stop, or does the neighboring agriculturist have to wait?

The majority of Santa Ynez Valley residents know that our rural landscape is protected by supporting the evolution of agriculture — but converting agricultural lands to commercial entertainment venues is contrary to achieving the goal.

Until this county undertakes a comprehensive study of the nature and impacts of tourist-related activities on agriculturally zoned properties, all requests like this should be denied.

“Community Matters” analyzes and explains topics of local public interest.

Local business owner Gail Marshall is a former 3rd District county supervisor.



Community Matters: Listen closely to talk of 'protecting agriculture'

By Bob Field/Contributing Writer

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You may wonder what the ongoing policy struggle over agricultural land-use is about, particularly since both sides in this debate claim to have the same goal: protecting agriculture.

Sometimes when people who say they have the same goal can't agree, it indicates that they do NOT have the same goal.

Not surprisingly, this issue is about money. Land-use decisions that increase the market value of ag land are profitable to the current owners but are detrimental to the economic viability of agriculture in the longer term. The increasing land cost makes it increasingly difficult for future buyers to make money through agricultural use of the property.

Since the high price of ag-zoned land is a primary threat to the long-term survival of agriculture in Santa Barbara County, it helps to understand the building blocks of the market price:

- 1) The *intrinsic value* : This basic value reflects the land's ability to produce economic profit through agricultural production. Factors include soil, climate, exposure and access to water, labor and markets. Alone, this should never be a problem because no rational agricultural businessman would pay more than would allow a reasonable return on investment.
- 2) The *development rights value* : Added to the intrinsic value is the value of the development rights available under the zoning. Quite simply, the more development rights, the more the market value. Aggravating the problem are development rights not related to agriculture, such as bed and breakfasts, non-agricultural housing or businesses, and so-called special events.
- 3) The *speculative value* : The price rises again when the buyer has reason to believe the market value of the land will go up over time, and return a profit upon sale. A trend in adding development rights increases the speculative value.
- 4) The size of the parcel is an additional and significant factor. A very reliable rule of thumb is that the smaller the parcel, the higher the cost per acre. A routine practice of allowing subdivision of ag-zoned lands also adds to the speculative value.

So, two of the worst land-use decisions we could make would be to add non-agricultural development rights to ag-zoned land, and to allow further subdivisions.

Interestingly, these actions are precisely what some agricultural landowners are lobbying for.

Their first argument goes like this: Anything that puts money in the hands of the current owners makes it more likely they will stay in agriculture. In the short term this may or may not be true, but in the long term it raises the market price of the land and certainly is detrimental.

Their second argument is the threat that if their requests are not granted, it will lead directly to urban development of the land.

First, this is not true because urban uses are not allowed under ag zoning. Second, and most ironically, the circular argument is that if we don't let them build houses, hotels and businesses on ag land, then the result will be houses, hotels and businesses on ag land! This argument invites intellectual whiplash.

In conclusion: Beware of proposals to "protect agriculture" by taking actions that will increase the market price of the land.

"Community Matters" analyzes and explains topics of public interest in the Santa Ynez Valley. Retired businessman Bob Field is volunteer president of his neighborhood's mutual water company and past chairman of the Valley Planning Advisory Committee.