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O.P.E.N.
OPEN-SPACE PRESERVATION EDUCATION NETWORK
A project of the Environmental Defense Center

March 18, 2009

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
Santa Barbara County
123 East Anapamu Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Re: Hunter-La Purisima Resort General Plan Amendment Initiation

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Chair Centeno and Honorable Supervisors,

This letter has been prepared as part of the Open-Space Preservation Educational Network (OPEN) project, which provides a proactive approach to assessing General Plans and planning processes in Santa Barbara County. OPEN is a project of the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) designed to engage all interested sectors of our communities in a dialog to encourage policies that will protect agricultural and open space lands and the urban-rural interface in the unincorporated portions of our County. Policies (and related ordinances) that address protection of agricultural lands are being assessed by the OPEN project. While OPEN staff do not typically comment on individual development projects, those with the potential to set County-wide precedents (such as the Hunter-La Purisima proposal) receive project-specific commentary. The following comments are submitted by the OPEN in response to the Board of Supervisors (BOS) agenda item set for March 24, 2009 to discuss the initiation of the Hunter-La Purisima General Plan Amendment (GPA) Request.

The Hunter-La Purisima project is located on Highway 246 near Lompoc and includes a proposal to change the land use designation of three parcels (306.2 acres in total) from Agriculture to Resort/Visitor Serving Commercial. The requested General Plan Amendment (GPA) would allow the development of an 80 room resort, 4,400 square foot restaurant, 3,200 square foot spa, banquet facility, and 85 clustered casitas. This GPA would permanently change the County General Plan and Land Use Element such that similar uses could be proposed on *all ag-zoned land in Rural Areas of the County*. The project site currently contains a 100-acre golf course and no agricultural uses. Surrounding agricultural uses include row crops, dry farming, and cattle grazing.

Our concerns involve a wide range of issues related to the long-term and wide-ranging implications of the proposed Hunter-La Purisima project, including:

- County Staff recommendations for denial in all previous project documentation and staff reports due to the project's glaring "inconsistency with the fundamental tenets of the County's Land Use Element" and the Agricultural Advisory Committee's (AAC) concern that rezoning land from Agriculture to Visitor/Serving Commercial could set a bad precedent on Rural land *Countywide*.
- The proposed project would require major amendments to the County's Land Use Element to allow development of the "Hunter/La Purisima Resort" in a designated Rural area of the County. This would set a precedent for conversion of agricultural land into urbanized uses, encourage leapfrog development, and undermine agricultural viability in Rural areas of the County.
- The proposed GPA would be incompatible with existing and surrounding County zoning designations, and would violate several Agricultural and Land Use Element goals and policies of the County's General Plan. It should therefore be denied.

Prior Planning Commission (PC) hearings were held on three separate occasions (November 12, 2008, December 10, 2008 and February 11, 2009). However, the PC declined to forward a recommendation for approval or denial to the BOS. On December 10, 2008 the Planning Commission considered initiation of the proposed GPA. During this hearing, the Commissioners reviewed and discussed possible GPA options which were presented by staff. The PC had several concerns with the project, including the following comments from Commissioner Brown:

- This project represents piecemeal planning. This area needs a Community Plan.
- The project presents concerns about changing agricultural land use designations to commercial.
- The project would urbanize a Rural area. Urban uses belong in Urban areas.

Although individual Commissioners expressed their preferences regarding these various GPA options, the Commission did not reach a consensus regarding project initiation. Instead, the Commission continued the initiation request to the February 11, 2009 hearing and requested that the project be reviewed by the County's Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC).

The Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) also commented on the project during their January 7, 2009 meeting and overwhelmingly recommended denial, with only one AAC member dissenting.

The AAC concluded the following with regard to the project:

- Rezoning land from Agriculture to Visitor/Serving Commercial could set a bad precedent on rural land countywide.

- The original CUP conditions for the golf course protected agriculture, yet there is no agriculture on the parcel.
- Potentially productive agricultural land is on site and the project would convert it to non-agricultural uses.
- The project may prohibit intensifying farming practices of adjacent agricultural land. (For example, converting grazing land and dry farmland to irrigated agriculture).
- The project could create land use conflicts with nearby agriculture and force them out of farming.
- The casitas may create land use conflicts with adjacent agriculture and buffers should be considered.
- Water runoff may become an issue for adjacent agricultural operations.

In a related issue, the AAC recently overwhelmingly voted against supporting the implementation of the proposed County-wide Rural Agricultural Diversification and Intensification Study (Study), which would have identified ag-zoned parcels with the potential for intensification of uses such as those proposed for the Hunter-La Purisima project. This Study was not supported by the BOS to receive funding for the upcoming Fiscal year 2009-10 Workplan.

County Staff has also recommended denial in all previous project documentation and staff reports due to the project's glaring "inconsistency with the fundamental tenets of the County's Land Use Element." The staff report for the project refers to the distinction between Urban and Rural uses that is reiterated throughout the Land Use Element, including the overarching policies, definitions, maps and Lompoc area policies. The Resort Visitor Serving Commercial Land Use Designation currently does not allow a residential component that allows for the proposed "Casitas", which may be wholly owned by discrete owners.

If the proposed project is accepted by your Board for initiation, several changes to the County's Comprehensive Plan would be required. The Countywide implications of these policy changes are significant, and as the Staff report acknowledges, could be wide-ranging. In order for the project to move forward, changes in the Land Use Element would be required to allow Resort/Visitor Serving Commercial designation for *virtually any parcel within the Rural area of the County*. The approval of the Resort on the proposed project site cannot be achieved without allowing the further expansion of Urban Uses into Rural areas of the County. Since a vast majority of the County's Rural areas consist of viable agricultural property, *the expansion of Urban uses into Rural areas would either directly displace agriculture or create conflicts with agricultural operations. Proceeding with GPA initiation of this project would also encourage property owners to non-renew their agricultural preserve contracts and directly facilitate the loss of agricultural land in the County.*

Overarching Project Issues

The proposed project site currently has an AG-II-100 (Agriculture) land use designation, with 100-AG zoning in accordance with the County's Comprehensive Plan's land use and zoning maps. The applicant proposes that the Comprehensive Plan's land use designation be changed for three subject parcels from AG-II-100 to Resort/Visitor Serving Commercial to accommodate a proposed resort facility, as well as amendments to the text of the Land Use Element to allow development of the "Hunter/La Purisima Resort" in a designated Rural area of the County. This requested action is likely to encourage "leapfrog development" of agricultural parcels and undermine agricultural viability in rural areas of the County.

The proposed GPA would be incompatible with existing and surrounding County zoning designations, and would violate several Agricultural Element goals and policies of the County's General Plan. It would also be incompatible with surrounding land use upon buildout, as the properties to the immediate west and south of the subject parcels are designated for large-scale agricultural uses (AG-II-100 and AC). As the Staff Report notes, the Cebada Canyon and Highway 246 corridor are active agricultural areas with varied farming and animal rearing uses. Active cattle grazing occurs to the south of the project site, and row crops and dry farming operations are present to the immediate west. The policies listed in the Santa Barbara County Agricultural Element do not support the conversion of agricultural land (particularly for AG-II land) to urbanized uses, nor do they allow for the introduction of conflicting land uses. Each of the following Agricultural Element policies would be violated by the project if the BOS approves initiation of the GPA.

Policy I.A. of the County's Agricultural Element states that the integrity of agricultural operations shall not be violated by non-compatible uses. The proposed project would violate this policy by expanding non-compatible urban development into and adjacent to agriculturally zoned areas.

Goal II of the Agricultural Element requires that agricultural lands shall be protected from adverse urban influences. The permanent conversion of agricultural land and the introduction of adverse urban influences into a rural area would be in violation of this policy goal.

Goal III of the Agricultural Element requires that where it is necessary for agricultural lands to be converted to other uses, the resulting use shall not interfere with remaining agricultural operations. The introduction of the proposed project would interfere with remaining large-scale agricultural operations located to the immediate west and south of the project site.

We agree with the policy analysis by County Staff regarding the project's conflicts with key provisions of the Land Use Element that require preservation of Rural areas for low-intensity uses (primarily agriculture, recreation, and public uses). As the Land Use Element requires, Urban uses such as commercial and residential development

with a density in excess of 0.2 units per acre must be restricted to Urban areas. Initiation of this request would encourage similar requests throughout the County's Rural areas.

As summarized above, the current proposed project violates the Agricultural and Land Use Elements of the County's General Plan, and should be denied for initiation into the County review process. Historically, the County has protected the viability of agriculture in rural areas by confining Urban uses within the urban boundary, and by discouraging sprawl into the Rural area.

We urge the BOS to support Staff's and the AAC's recommendation and deny initiation of the proposed GPA due to the dangerous precedent it would set for the conversion of Rural uses zoned for agriculture into urbanized uses.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project.

Best Regards,

Via e-mail

Christina McGinnis, M.U.P., OPEN Project Planner

