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City of Salinas
65 W. Alisal Street
Salinas, CA 93901

8/11/2020

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Jul 30 2020

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Dear Ms. Miller:

NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY OF THE CENTRAL AREA SPECIFIC PLAN DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT, SCH# 2017091022

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Central Area Specific Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report (Project). The Division monitors farmland conversion on a statewide basis, provides technical assistance regarding the Williamson Act, and administers various agricultural land conservation programs. We offer the following comments and recommendations with respect to the proposed project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

Project Description

The Central Area Specific Plan will establish the land use planning and regulatory guidance for the approximately 760-acre Specific Plan Area. The Specific Plan will serve as a bridge between the Salinas General Plan and individual development applications in the Specific Plan Area, applying and adding greater specificity to the goals, policies and concepts of the General Plan for that area. The Specific Plan has been crafted to be consistent with overall community goals as expressed in the General Plan.

The Salinas Zoning Code requirements will apply to development applications and property within the Specific Plan Area unless specifically superseded by the development regulations or design standards contained in the Specific Plan. The underlying purpose of the proposed project is the approval and subsequent implementation of the proposed Central Area Specific Plan and related entitlements. Proposed land uses in the approximately 760-acre Specific Plan Area include residential, mixed-use commercial, neighborhood parks, small parks, schools and open space including supplemental storm water detention/retention basins.

Currently, the project site is in agricultural use and contains Prime, Statewide, and Unique Farmland, as identified by the Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program¹.

Department Comments

The conversion of agricultural land represents a permanent reduction and significant impact to California's agricultural land resources. Under CEQA, a lead agency should not approve a project if there are feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures available that would lessen the significant effects of the project.² All mitigation measures that are potentially feasible should be included in the project's environmental review. A measure brought to the attention of the lead agency should not be left out unless it is infeasible based on its elements.

As the courts have shown³, agricultural conservation easements on land of at least equal quality and size can mitigate project impacts in accordance with CEQA Guideline § 15370. The Department highlights agricultural conservation easements because of their acceptance and use by lead agencies as an appropriate mitigation measure under CEQA. Agricultural conservation easements are an available mitigation tool and should always be considered; however, any other feasible mitigation measures should also be considered.

A source that has proven helpful for regional and statewide agricultural mitigation banks is the California Council of Land Trusts. They provide helpful insight into farmland mitigation policies and implementation strategies, including a guidebook with model policies and a model local ordinance. The guidebook can be found at:

<http://www.calandtrusts.org/resources/conserving-californias-harvest/>

Conclusion

Prior to approval of the proposed project the Department recommends further discussion of the following issues:

- Type, amount, and location of farmland conversion resulting directly and indirectly from implementation of the proposed project.
- Impacts on any current and future agricultural operations in the vicinity; e.g., land-use conflicts, increases in land values and taxes, loss of agricultural support infrastructure such as processing facilities, etc.
- Incremental impacts leading to cumulative impacts on agricultural land. This would include impacts from the proposed project, as well as impacts from past, current, and likely future projects.

¹ California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, <https://maps.conservation.ca.gov/DLRP/CIFF/>

² Public Resources Code section 21002.

³ *Masonite Corp. v. County of Mendocino* (2013) 218 Cal.App.4th 230, 238.

- Proposed mitigation measures for all impacted agricultural lands within the proposed project area.
- Projects compatibility with, or, potential contract resolutions for land in an agricultural preserve and/or enrolled in a Williamson Act contract.
- Potential impacts, and proposed mitigation for lands held under agricultural easements.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Central Area Specific Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report. Please provide this Department with notices of any future hearing dates as well as any staff reports pertaining to this project. If you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Farl Grundy, Associate Environmental Planner at (916) 324-7347 or via email at Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Monique Wilber

Monique Wilber
Conservation Program Support Supervisor