



MAY 10, 2022

VIA EMAIL: RBRADY@RIVCO.ORG

Riverside County Planning Department
Attn: Russell Brady, Contract Planner
4080 Lemon Street, 12th Floor
Riverside, CA 92501



Dear Mr. Brady:

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR THE STONERIDGE COMMERCE CENTER PROJECT, SCH# 2020040325

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Stoneridge Commerce Center Project (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 project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

Project Description

The Project as evaluated in the Stoneridge Commerce Center EIR includes two separate land use plans for the 582.6-acre Project site. The "Primary Land Use Plan" anticipates that the Project would be constructed with Ramona Expressway providing primary access from the north and Nuevo Road providing access from the south, and that the site would be developed with up to 3888.5 acres of Light Industrial land uses, 49.1 acres of Business Park land uses, 8.0 acres of Commercial Retail land uses, Open Space – Conservation on 18.1 acres, Open Space – Conservation Habitat on 81.6 acres, and major roadways on 37.3 acres.

Pursuant to Amendment No. 1 to Specific Plan No. 239 (SP 239A1), Light Industrial and Business Park land uses may be developed at a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) up to 0.50, while Commercial Retail land uses can be developed at a FAR up to 0.35. However, the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) is currently planning the construction of a regional transportation facility, the "Mid-County Parkway (MCP)," a segment of which, along with an interchange, are planned to traverse the northwestern portions of the Project site. The MCP is a long-range transportation improvement by RCTC; however, the RCTC has not secured or identified funding for the

segment of the MCP which traverses the Project area, and therefore the timing of this segment of the MCP and the associated interchange is unknown at this time.

In addition, and due to environmental, economic, right of way, or other factors, it is possible that RCTC ultimately may not construct the MCP in this portion of Riverside County. Notwithstanding, the "Alternative Land Use Plan" anticipates that the MCP would be constructed through the northwest portions of the site, in which case the site would be developed with 388.5 acres of Light Industrial land uses, 51.5 acres of Business Park land uses (of which 8.5 acres would be within the alignment of the MCP and would not be developed with Business Park land uses), 8.5 acres of Commercial Retail land uses (of which 0.2 acre would occur within the alignment of the MCP and would not be developed with Commercial Retail land uses), 18.1 acres of Open Space – Conservation, 81.6 acres of Open Space – Conservation Habitat, and 34.4 acres of major roadways.

As with the Primary Land Use Plan, the Alternative Land Use Plan would allow for development of Light Industrial and Business Park uses at a maximum FAR of 0.50, while Commercial Retail land uses could be developed at a maximum FAR of 0.35. Thus, in order to accommodate both the potential for the future construction of the MCP while also providing for development of the site in the event the MCP is not constructed as currently planned by RCTC, the two land use concepts are evaluated for the site throughout the Stoneridge Commerce Center EIR at an equal level of detail.

Department Comments

The conversion of agricultural land represents a permanent reduction and significant impact to California's agricultural land resources. CEQA requires that all feasible and reasonable mitigation be reviewed and applied to projects. 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.

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.

Consistent with CEQA Guidelines, the Department recommends the County consider agricultural conservation easements, among other measures, as potential mitigation. (See Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15370 [mitigation includes "compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments, including through permanent protection of such resources in the form of conservation easements."])

Mitigation through agricultural easements can take at least two forms: the outright purchase of easements or the donation of mitigation fees to a local, regional, or statewide organization or agency whose purpose includes the acquisition and

stewardship of agricultural easements. The conversion of agricultural land should be deemed an impact of at least regional significance. Hence, the search for replacement lands should not be limited strictly to lands within the project's surrounding area.

A helpful source 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:

[California Council of Land Trusts](#)

Of course, the use of conservation easements is only one form of mitigation that should be considered. Any other feasible mitigation measures should also be considered. Indeed, the recent judicial opinion in *King and Gardiner Farms, LLC v. County of Kern* (2020) 45 Cal.App.5th 814 ("KG Farms") holds that agricultural conservation easements on a 1 to 1 ratio are not alone sufficient to adequately mitigate a project's conversion of agricultural land. KG Farms does not stand for the proposition that agricultural conservation easements are irrelevant as mitigation. Rather, the holding suggests that to the extent they are considered, they may need to be applied at a greater than 1 to 1 ratio, or combined with other forms of mitigation (such as restoration of some land not currently used as farmland).

Conclusion

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.
- Proposed mitigation measures for all impacted agricultural lands within the proposed project area.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Stoneridge Commerce Center Project. 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 via email at Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Monique Wilber

Monique Wilber
Conservation Program Support Supervisor