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VIA EMAIL: PLANNING@LEMOORE.COM

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Judy Holwell
Community Development Director
City of Lemoore
Lemoore, CA 93245

Aug 27 2020

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Dear Ms. Holwell:

NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT AND NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY OF AN INITIAL STUDY FOR THE PROPOSED LACEY RANCH AREA MASTER PLAN PROJECT, SCH# 2020080314

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Notice of Preparation and Initial Study for the Lacey Ranch Area Master Plan 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 proposed project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

Project Description

The applicant is proposing to subdivide and develop approximately 156 acres of land into a planned residential community with a mix of single-family and multi-family housing units. Approximately 75% of the site will be developed with single family housing units on a variety of lot sizes, with the remainder to be developed with multi-family housing and parks/trails.

The applicant proposes to annex the site into the City Limits of Lemoore and will require a General Plan Amendment and Zone Change to change the land use designations from agriculture to residential. The Project will also require a modification to the City's Sphere of Influence. The project site was historically, and is currently, used for agriculture and contains Prime Farmland as identified by the Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program.¹ The site is also subject to a Williamson Act contract.

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

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.
- 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.

² Public Resources Code section 21002.

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

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Notice of Preparation and Initial Study for the Lacey Ranch Area Master Plan 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 at (916) 324-7347 or via email at Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Monique Wilber

Monique Wilber

Conservation Program Support Supervisor