



# Creating Sustainable Communities and Landscapes

Recommended practices and tools for local collaboration on climate-smart growth



**CALIFORNIA  
STRATEGIC  
GROWTH  
COUNCIL**



OCTOBER 2018

# INTRODUCTION

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The State of California has a rich history of environmental leadership. With some of the most beautiful landscapes and fertile soils in the country, we have much to protect and conserve. As the State's population grows towards fifty million people, infrastructure demands place intensified levels of stress on California's agricultural and natural wealth. In order to address these challenges, California has led the charge nationally to reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions, because we recognize that this battle is not only about the environment – it is also about protecting the well-being of our families and communities. To ensure the prosperous future of our State, we must shift to a more conscientious approach to land use planning in California – one that balances the needs of conservation and development<sup>1</sup>. In order to balance these priorities, the State has put new laws in place for new housing and infill development, community resilience, economic growth in urban and rural areas, and set an ambitious target for carbon neutrality by 2045 that relies upon efficient and orderly growth across California.

Reaching California's climate goals will require implementing a variety of strategies including **shifting to more efficient and sustainable land use patterns**. This means focusing our efforts on compact growth in existing neighborhoods, while conserving wildlife habitat, farmland, and open space, also known as natural and working lands. There are many economic, environmental, and health benefits to this kind of focused growth, but the climate-specific benefits are two-fold. First, infill development reduces personal vehicle use by enabling Californians to walk, bike, use transit, engage in shared mobility, or drive only short distances to get where they need to go. This compact development also facilitates

energy and water savings by using these resources more efficiently. Second, protecting farmland and open space is beneficial because these lands can serve to sequester carbon and provide nature-based services to support urban areas, including **natural infrastructure**<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, protection of natural and working lands helps to fuel California's agriculture and tourism economies, all the while providing food security and myriad ecosystem services for local communities. This kind of land use is often referred to as smart growth, and it has become a priority in California to plan for such focused development throughout the State.

Cities, counties and special districts are on the front lines of implementing infill development and protecting natural and working lands at the local level. In support of these goals, they can benefit by building strong relationships with Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCo), which can also play a critical role in promoting efficient growth. Among many other things, LAFCos have authority to determine the most efficient growth patterns and service areas in a county through the adoption of Spheres of Influence (SOI), the Municipal Service Review (MSR) process, and other LAFCo policies and functions. MSRs can help support better decision-making for service area expansion for when applications from cities and special districts are received or, more pro-actively, when countywide or local general

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2 Natural infrastructure is now a statutorily recognized preference for State agencies and communities, responding to new mandates on addressing climate risk. It is defined as the preservation or restoration of ecological systems, or utilization of engineered systems that use ecological processes, to increase resiliency to climate change, manage other environmental hazards, or both. This may include, but is not limited to, floodplain and wetlands restoration or preservation, combining levees with restored natural systems to reduce flood risk, and urban tree planting to mitigate high heat days. See General Plan Guidelines Chapter 4: Safety for additional information.

<http://opr.ca.gov/planning/general-plan/>

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1 This vision is outlined in the State Planning Priorities, which were codified into law in 2002 (Government Code §65041.1).

plan updates are prepared. This can help support more urban-focused growth by reducing sprawl and set the stage for determining which areas are conserved as natural or working lands. LAFCoS also have a unique opportunity to help facilitate relationships among local agencies and raise awareness of best practices around growth management in support of local efforts to create sustainable communities.

## ABOUT LAFCoS

Created by the Knox-Nisbet Act of 1963, LAFCoS are county-level agencies whose commissions are composed of local city and county elected officials, special district elected officials (in 30 of the 58 LAFCoS), and public members. They were established in response to rapid and disorderly development in California during the post-WWII housing boom – so disorderly that some have referred to this era as the “annexation wars.” At the time, there was a great deal of competition among cities to incorporate quickly and annex as much land as possible, which the legislature recognized as detrimental to the public interest. For this reason, LAFCoS are often called the “watchdogs” of the legislature in promoting orderly development and provision of services.

Local Agency Formation Commissions are becoming more important as a partner in the implementation of State and local goals related to infill development, greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and climate change resilience. In light of California’s commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, smart growth and protection of natural and working lands are crucial. These commitments can also allow a community to become more

resilient to the changing climate and to better prepare for the extreme weather events that are increasingly facing the State. Working together, local governments and LAFCoS have a unique opportunity to advance smart growth policies and practices in every county of the State. Many LAFCoS have recognized their ability to support efficient growth at the city and county level, and are implementing innovative policies that help to preserve agricultural land and open space while also encouraging infill development. Yet LAFCoS also face many challenges, including resource and capacity constraints as well as local political pressure.

## LAFCoS AS PARTNERS IN SMART GROWTH

This paper highlights case studies in which LAFCoS, cities, counties and special districts successfully partnered to reduce suburban sprawl and increase the conservation of natural and working lands, while also considering how to improve community resilience. Developed through a collaboration among the Strategic Growth Council, the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research and the California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions (CALAFCO), this paper is intended to help support coordination among local entities to advance efficient growth and conservation of natural resources. It also aims to raise awareness of available tools and resources that can be used to create more environmentally and economically sustainable communities throughout California.

## PART I

# CALIFORNIA PLANNING AND CONTEXT: LAY OF THE LAND

California has long been a pioneer on environmental issues, and continues to lead the charge on climate efforts both nationally and internationally. The State had developed a coordinated suite of laws, policies and guiding documents that set the path to reaching our climate goals. The State Planning Priorities – to conserve natural and working lands, promote infill development and equity, and support efficient development patterns – were codified into law in 2002 and support climate and conservation goals concurrently. In 2006, the State adopted the Global Warming Solutions Act (Assembly Bill 32), setting the goal to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, a reduction of approximately 15% compared to a “business as usual” scenario. This legislation was followed by Senate Bill 32, Executive Order B-30-15, Senate Bill 350, and Executive Order B-55-18 that specify targets beyond 2020, including reducing GHG emissions to 40% below 1990 levels by the year 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2045. These are ambitious goals, particularly in light of the fact that the State’s population is projected to grow to more than 50 million residents by 2050. The Scoping Plan is the State’s roadmap to reach these targets, setting the main strategies that California will use to reduce GHG emissions. Among other strategies, including the use of renewable energies and improving energy efficiency, the Scoping Plan prioritizes infill development to protect natural and working lands.

Another important piece of legislation, The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (Senate Bill 375) has helped set a long-range planning framework for meeting GHG emission reductions through regional land use strategies. This bill requires Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) or Councils of Government (COGs) for each region of California to create a “Sustainable Communities Strategy,” combining the

The 1978 Urban Strategy first set state planning priorities for California, which were adopted into law in 2002 (Government Code §65041.1). OPR released a second Environmental Goals and Policy Report in November 2015 entitled “A Strategy for California @ 50 Million: Supporting California’s Climate Change Goals.” Briefly, the priorities are to:

- a. Promote infill development and rehabilitation and utilization of existing infrastructure, including water, sewer, and transportation.
- b. Protect the state’s natural and working lands, including agricultural land, lands of cultural and historic significance, wetlands, and wildlands.
- c. Develop in an efficient manner that limits sprawl and minimizes costs to taxpayers.

Regional Transportation Plan and the Regional Housing Needs Assessment into one document that sets guidance for where development should be directed regionally in order to maximize emissions reductions. As a 2016 paper by The Nature Conservancy highlights, the framework established by Senate Bill 375 contributes to reducing GHG emissions in at least three important ways. First, by defining resource areas and farmland where development should be avoided, helping to increase carbon sequestration; second, by encouraging more compact development that can help Californians avoid driving long distances for day-to-day necessities; and third, by promoting investments to encourage infill development.

Not every area of the state is represented by an MPO or a COG<sup>3</sup>, and even for those that are, regional governments' power to enforce these land use strategies is limited, as that power resides in county and city governments. However, MPOs can use their authority over transportation spending to provide incentives for strategy implementation. For example, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) has identified priority development areas and priority conservation areas in its Sustainable Communities Strategy known as Plan Bay Area. The MTC provides incentive funding for a city or county to focus activities in these areas. Sustainable Communities Strategies provide useful information for LAFCOs that can be helpful in deciding which land within their jurisdiction should be developed, and which areas should be conserved as agricultural land and open space.

While all land use is local – as the saying goes – State agencies can provide guidance to help create successful growth management policies and practices. The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) and the Strategic Growth Council (SGC) work together closely to provide resources for local and regional agencies on topics related to land use. OPR develops and manages the General Plan Guidelines, an important “how to” resource for local jurisdictions drafting a general plan and managing urban and suburban growth. This resource includes statutory mandates, guidance, case studies, and best practices to help support local planning initiatives. The most recent version of these guidelines, released in 2017, includes guidance to implement new mandates on climate change, housing, environmental justice, health, air quality, as well as information on legislative changes, policy recommendations, and additional resources. This document will be discussed in more depth in Part V of this paper, in addition to other State resources and tools available to facilitate infill development.

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3 According to Federal law, urbanized area with population of at least 50,000 must be guided and maintained by a regional entity such as an MPO or a COG

## PART II

# THE BENEFITS OF GROWTH MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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Smart growth is a framework for planning that encourages mixed-use development within existing neighborhoods. This model for growth aims to cultivate compact communities that require less driving to reach daily destinations while protecting nearby farmland and open space from development. There are many compelling reasons to shift land use patterns to a smart growth model – reasons that span economic, social, and environmental considerations.

The economic argument for smart growth is two-fold. First, smart growth spurs the economic vitality of cities, and second, preserving agricultural and natural lands protects California's strong agricultural economy, contributes to local and regional food security, and supports ecosystem health. Research has shown that vibrant, walkable downtown centers are engines for economic growth, and that demand is increasing for housing in walkable, transit-rich places in cities across California and throughout the country. A study by Smart Growth America found that directing growth to existing neighborhoods saves up to 38% on upfront costs for construction of new roads, sewers, water lines and other infrastructure and saves 10% on provision of services such as police, ambulance and fire service costs. Additionally, this study found that on an average per-acre basis, smart growth development provides 10 times more tax revenue than conventional suburban development (Smart Growth America, 2013).

Conserving agricultural lands also has significant benefits. The State of California has some of the most productive agricultural lands in the world and is the country's largest producer and exporter of agricultural products. Additionally, agriculture plays an important role in fueling local economies, providing jobs and improving local and regional food security. It is also a central piece of California's cultural heritage and way of life. CALAFCO and American Farmland Trust published a

paper entitled “[State of the Art on Agricultural Preservation](#)” in February 2018 that provides more detail about the benefits of protecting farmland in California and outlines successful strategies for LAFCOs to do so.

Protecting natural landscapes provides myriad benefits as well. Intact ecosystems support the State's abundant biodiversity while also providing benefits in the form of clean water and air, climate stability, increased resiliency to storm events, conservation of wildlife habitat, and valuable recreation opportunities – just to name a few examples. Natural landscapes can also serve as natural infrastructure, now a statutorily recognized preference for State agencies and communities responding to new mandates on addressing climate risk. These healthy systems improve the quality of life of those who live in California, and draw tourists from around the country and the world.

As already emphasized in this paper, the environmental benefits of infill development are also compelling. Compact cities, towns and neighborhoods make walking, biking and transit use more viable and make it easier for residents to drive less frequently. Minimizing personal vehicle use has significant air quality benefits, reducing both GHG emissions and congestion for those who do opt to drive. Reducing traffic and parking demand themselves can have important air quality benefits because people spend less time running their engines on clogged highways or circling around to find parking. Further, working and natural landscapes – particularly forests – are instrumental in the fight against climate change because they serve as carbon sinks by absorbing and removing carbon dioxide from the air.

Lastly, there is strong evidence that smart growth has meaningful social and health benefits as well. The public health impacts of improved air quality and neighborhood design that is conducive to walking and biking are significant and well-documented. A recent California

Department of Public Health study used the Integrated Transport and Public Health Impacts Model to estimate a variety of health-related outcomes if the State is able to meet its ambitious mobility and health goals. The findings indicate that California could avoid over 2,000 deaths due to chronic disease each year by doubling walking and transit trips and tripling trips taken by bicycle (Maizlish, 2016). The availability of parks and open spaces is another boon for the physical and mental health of individuals, while also providing neighborhood gathering spaces that can help build community. There are some more hidden social benefits as well, such as reducing commute times for families, allowing parents more time to spend with their children; increased transit access, which can have economic benefits for low-income families; and even increased social interaction between residents of walk- and bike-friendly neighborhoods. Researchers have found that social cohesion can be a crucial component determining community resilience in the wake of natural disasters (Klinenberg, 2003; Aldrich and Meyer, 2014). As the intensity and frequency of such disasters increases, the importance of building community must not be overlooked.

For all of these reasons, the State of California is taking steps to encourage smart growth land use patterns, working in concert with local jurisdictions such as cities, counties and special districts. These agencies are at the forefront of the shift towards smart growth because they set local policies to preserve open space and encourage efficient growth. LAFCOs play a critical role in helping to guide city boundary and service provision expansion. They can also take a leadership role in educating and

***“Directing growth to existing neighborhoods saves up to 38% on upfront costs for construction of new roads, sewers, water lines and other infrastructure and saves 10% on provision of services such as police, ambulance and fire service costs. “***

informing local agencies regarding growth management best practices and encouraging collaboration around these issues. As highlighted in the case studies to follow, LAFCOs have many opportunities to support and uphold strong city and county policies such as urban growth boundaries, urban service area boundaries, greenbelts, or community separators. They can also require agricultural land preservation plans, vacant land analysis and absorption studies, as well as agricultural land mitigation, in cases of land annexation or SOI expansion proposals that would allow farmland to be developed. Cities, counties, and special districts are also benefitted by building strong partnerships with LAFCOs, as these relationships can result in increased capacity and better decisions vis-à-vis local development patterns.

# PART III

## LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSIONS

Given the important role of LAFCoS in local land use decisions, it is important to understand a bit of their history and mandate. As mentioned earlier, LAFCoS were established in 1963 by the Knox-Nisbet Act. They are State-mandated county-level entities whose mission is to encourage orderly growth, preserve agricultural land resources, and discourage urban sprawl. LAFCoS have both planning and regulatory authority to determine city boundary changes, define city spheres of influence, and manage the creation, consolidation and dissolution of special districts. Their commissioners include local city and county elected officials, public members and, in many cases, special district elected officials. In this role, LAFCoS have a unique opportunity to help align local development patterns with statewide goals for sustainability, including improvements in public health, community resilience, economic opportunity, and food security.

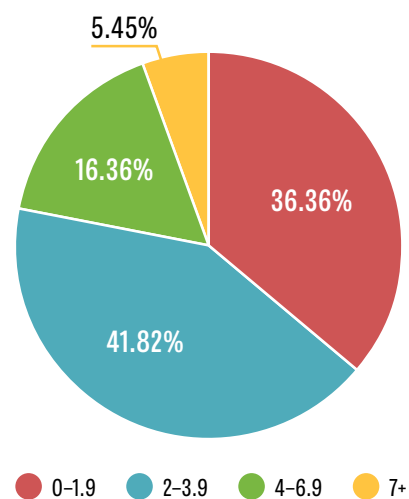
The roles and responsibilities of LAFCoS have evolved and expanded over the years. Originally, LAFCoS only had power over the incorporation of cities and the creation of special districts. However, the legislature has significantly expanded those initial responsibilities to include the following (CALAFCo Testimony, 2016):

- » Processing city and district annexations and detachments, as well as proposals to dissolve or reorganize the structure of cities and special districts;
- » Determining property tax revenue exchange amounts for agencies in cases of revised city and special district boundaries;
- » Addressing the activation or divestiture of latent services or powers;
- » Conducting sphere-of-influence updates and municipal service reviews;

- » Mapping and planning for disadvantaged unincorporated communities;
- » Complying with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Sustainable Communities Strategies created by SB 375; and
- » Conducting special studies.

Despite these expanded responsibilities, LAFCoS often operate on small budgets and with limited staff. According to a 2015 CALAFCo survey, more than 36% of these commissions have fewer than two staff members, while only three (5.5%) have seven or more staff. Most LAFCoS employ part-time contractual personnel or county staff to help complete tasks on a tight budget. In fact, CALAFCo's survey found that more than 32% of LAFCoS have staff members that also work for the county, including some executive officers. This is most common in rural counties. Thus, while these entities are meant to be independent

**FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF LAFCO STAFF**



CREDIT: CALAFCO TESTIMONY, 2016



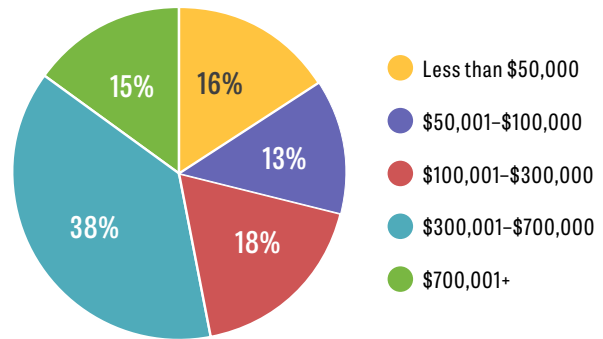
from counties, financial barriers often impede their ability to act independently. See Figure 1 (on previous page) for more details on LAFCo staffing around the state.

LAFCos receive revenues from the counties, cities, and special districts that are eligible to be represented on the commissions. State law requires that the funding be split evenly among the represented agencies (for example, if cities, the county and special districts are all represented on the commission, each will pay a one-third share of the budget). Individual LAFCos are also allowed to modify this funding formula if they so choose. For example, Butte LAFCo has special district representation and all parties involved agreed that special districts pay less than the one-third apportionment. The LAFCo funding structure is one explanation for the considerable diversity in size and capacity of LAFCos across the State. They have so far been ineligible for State grant funding as primary applicants and thus their budgets are highly dependent on the revenue of local agencies and the extent to which funding for LAFCos is prioritized locally. In some cases, local agencies may be reluctant to devote sufficient funds to LAFCos due to political pressure to minimize government functions or to relax regulation on sprawl development.

In light of these challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that LAFCo budgets vary widely across the State and that most LAFCos are operating on very tight budgets. For example, 16% of LAFCos have an annual budget below \$50,000. As an extreme example, Mono LAFCo adopted a budget of only \$10,869 for FY 2018-2019, and contracts all of its staff through the County. On the other end of the spectrum, 15% have an annual budget that exceeds \$700,000. San Diego LAFCo adopted a budget of \$1,906,694 for FY 2018-19. In CALAFCO's 2015 survey, 34% of LAFCos reported that their budgets were barely sufficient to meet statutory requirements and 11% indicated that their budgets were insufficient to do so (CALAFCO Testimony, 2016).

In addition to funding and capacity challenges, local political pressure can often complicate commission decision-making processes. Considering that most commissioners are locally elected officials, it can be challenging for them to make unpopular decisions

FIGURE 2



CREDIT: CALAFCO TESTIMONY, 2016

regarding annexation proposals or sphere-of-influence extensions, even when proposals are in conflict with the mission and/or policies of the LAFCo. Similarly, when LAFCos do reject popular proposals in order to enforce their policies, they may risk a negative backlash and even efforts to change commission leadership. Since LAFCos tend to have little name recognition and understanding of their mission and goals among the general public, they are particularly vulnerable to negative public opinion in the case of controversial decisions. This is not only concerning for individual commissioners; it can also impede the efficacy of LAFCos, and by extension, of growth management efforts around the State.

In spite of these challenges, LAFCos can be successful in meaningfully influencing land use patterns in their counties, especially through strong and positive partnership with other local bodies. Through the promotion of strong policies, they can help protect farmland and encourage the development of compact, walkable cities. Not only does well-planned growth have important environmental benefits, it can also improve public health, advance equity and drive economic growth. While LAFCos share some significant challenges, many of them have developed strong policies and creative strategies to manage growth in their counties, as outlined in the case studies described in the following section.



**PART IV**  
**CASE STUDIES**



## CASE STUDY: SANTA CLARA COUNTY

PHOTO CREDIT: SANTA CLARA LAFCo

### BACKGROUND

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Santa Clara County was in the throes of the so-called “annexation wars,” in which a variety of local agencies and communities were competing to incorporate or annex as much land as possible. For example, in Santa Clara County, seven new cities were incorporated between 1952 and 1957, and the boundaries of existing cities also grew substantially. By the early 1960s, the County was a sprawling patchwork of development that was difficult and expensive to serve, while a significant amount of valuable farmland had been transitioned to urban or suburban land uses. Many other regions in California were experiencing the same problems, which led the State Legislature to create LAFCos in 1963.

### UNIQUE GROWTH MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

By the late 1960s, it became clear that a countywide framework for managing urban growth was necessary to address these issues. In the early 1970s, Santa Clara LAFCo, the County, and the 15 cities jointly developed and adopted a set of policies known as the *Countywide Urban Development Policies*. These policies define the roles and responsibilities of local agencies regarding the timing and location of urban development in the County. Two key aspects of these policies are that:

- » Urban development should occur only on lands annexed to cities – and not within unincorporated areas

- » Urban expansion should occur in an orderly, planned manner – with cities responsible for planning, annexing, and providing services to urban development, within boundaries called “urban service areas.”

Subsequently, each of the 15 cities proposed, and LAFCo adopted, urban service area (USA) boundaries delineating lands the cities intended to annex, develop, and provide urban services – while conserving lands not suitable for urban development such as natural and working lands. LAFCo approval is required in order to amend the USAs.

Because USA boundaries determine where and when future growth will occur and services will be provided, LAFCo staff reviews each USA expansion request very carefully.<sup>4</sup> In recognition of this unique growth management framework, the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 includes a special provision for Santa Clara County (Government Code §56757), which allows a city to annex land within its USA without Santa Clara LAFCo’s further review and approval.

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<sup>4</sup> LAFCo evaluates whether there are infill development opportunities and whether the city has used its existing supply of vacant land before seeking to expand its USA, whether the expansion would result in conversion of agricultural or open space lands, whether the services and infrastructure needed to support the proposed growth can be financed and provided without negatively impacting current city services, and whether there is an adequate water supply available, among other considerations.

## OUTCOMES

Santa Clara LAFCo's consistent implementation of the growth management framework over the last 45 years has facilitated compact growth and continued economic prosperity in the County. This has enabled the preservation of a vast network of open space lands in close proximity to the cities and the sustained economic viability of farmland outside of the cities. Executive Officer Neelima Palacherla says that Santa Clara LAFCo's USA policy has "stood the test of time." Over the last 20 to 25 years, many cities in the county have accommodated large population increases without outward expansion. The largest city in the County, San Jose, is projected to add 200,000 in population over the next 20 years – all of which the City's Envision 2040 General Plan intends to accommodate within its existing boundaries. This is consistent with the Bay Area's Sustainable Communities Strategy and the growing statewide recognition that reduction of transportation-related GHGs is best accomplished by directing growth into existing infill areas.

However, growth management in Santa Clara County is not always easy and Santa Clara LAFCo has faced many challenges in maintaining orderly and efficient growth. Its recent decisions on two proposals seeking to transition nearly 1,000 acres of prime farmland to suburban and urban uses have affirmed its strength in preventing sprawl and protecting farmland in the face of opposition.

In 2015, the City of Gilroy proposed a USA expansion that would have converted 721 acres of mostly prime farmland to urban uses, just north of the city. When reviewing the City's Environmental Impact Report (EIR), Santa Clara LAFCo found that the City had not adequately analyzed the project's impacts (e.g. water supply, police and fire services, growth inducement, and cumulative impacts), and had neglected to adopt adequate mitigation measures. When the City failed to address the LAFCo's concerns, communicated through multiple comment letters, the LAFCo responded by initiating litigation against the City, which resulted in the City rescinding its certification of the EIR and application. This sequence of events raised the community's awareness of the importance of farmland preservation and curbing sprawl to such an extent that Gilroy voters subsequently approved

a ballot initiative in 2016 to create an urban growth boundary around the city, protecting an additional 2,000 acres of farmland and signaling a long-term positive change in this community's vision.

In 2016, the City of Morgan Hill proposed a USA expansion that would have converted 229 acres of prime farmland to urban uses, just southeast of the city. Prior to the City submitting the proposal, LAFCo staff formally expressed its concerns about the project and worked with the City and other affected local agencies in hopes of developing an alternative plan. However, the City decided to move forward with their original proposal, in spite of the existence of vacant lands within the existing USA and opposition from many members of the local community. Since the proposal did not meet many of the criteria that LAFCo uses to evaluate USA amendment requests, the Commission made the difficult decision to deny the proposal. LAFCo's action, along with local agencies' renewed interest in agricultural preservation, helped spur the County of Santa Clara and Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority to work together to create a Santa Clara Valley Agricultural Plan that highlights the importance of preserving agricultural land and open space as a climate change mitigation and economic development strategy.<sup>5</sup> The Plan has prompted new local, regional, and state partnerships for the creation of an agricultural conservation program to enable permanent protection of farmland.

## TOOLS UTILIZED

- » Countywide urban development policies
- » Urban Service Area boundaries and policies
- » Early and consistent communication with cities during General Plan update and policy development processes
- » Ensuring adequate environmental impact analysis as a Responsible Agency under CEQA

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<sup>5</sup> The Agricultural Plan was funded in part through a Strategic Growth Council Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Grant

## DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

- » Long-standing countywide urban development policies and a tradition of protecting natural lands
- » Commission's willingness to take bold and politically challenging actions
- » Careful review and detailed analysis of expansion proposals
- » Successful partnerships with local agencies and organizations
- » Presence of a strong constituency who support smart growth and conservation

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In spite of its history of strong growth management policies in Santa Clara County that protect its agricultural heritage and open space, recent attempts by cities to significantly extend their Urban Service Areas (USAs) show that there remains pressure for urban sprawl development to occur in the County. Additionally, as time passes and there is staff turnover at local agencies, there is less institutional knowledge of the history of the countywide urban development policies and their role in growth management and relevance to current day planning. As a result, LAFCo recognizes a need to conduct more education and outreach to affected agencies and the community in order to maintain and increase its effectiveness. Recently LAFCo retained a consultant to prepare a Communications and Outreach Plan and help expand an understanding of its mandate and policies among local agencies and the community. Lastly, Santa Clara LAFCo, like many other LAFCos, struggles to build capacity on a tight budget. The LAFCo has recently hired a new staff member, which will help lighten staff workload a bit, but it remains challenging for the LAFCo staff to carry out important research, analysis and communication with few resources.

**95%** OF THE COUNTY'S  
POPULATION

lives within cities' Urban Service Areas

REPRESENTING

LESS THAN **25%**  
OF THE COUNTY LAND AREA

ALMOST **250,000 ACRES**

is protected open space land or  
under conservation easements

## USEFUL LINKS

- » CALAFCO Conference Presentation on Urban Growth Boundaries, 2015: [https://CALAFCO.org/sites/default/files/resources/Urban\\_Growth\\_Boundaries\\_all\\_in\\_one.pdf](https://CALAFCO.org/sites/default/files/resources/Urban_Growth_Boundaries_all_in_one.pdf)
- » San Jose's Envision 2040 General Plan: <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/index.aspx?NID=1737>
- » Santa Clara Valley Agricultural Plan: <https://www.openspaceauthority.org/conservation/current-projects/santa-clara-valley-agricultural-plan.html>
- » Santa Clara Valley Greenprint: <https://www.openspaceauthority.org/conservation/conservation-priorities/santa-clara-valley-greenprint.html>
- » How Urban Development Policies Have Made a Difference in Santa Clara County: 40 Years Later, Policies Still Cutting-Edge and Vital: [http://www.santaclaralafco.org/file/UD\\_Policies\\_in\\_SCC\\_by\\_Don\\_Weden.pdf](http://www.santaclaralafco.org/file/UD_Policies_in_SCC_by_Don_Weden.pdf)
- » LAFCo of Santa Clara County Integrating Growth and Conservation: <http://www.santaclaralafco.org/file/Policies/IntegratingDevAndConsv-RevJul2017.pdf>
- » LAFCo Staff Report for Morgan Hill Urban Service Area Amendment 2015 [https://santaclaralafco.org/images/resumes/agenda\\_packet/StaffReport\\_20160215.pdf](https://santaclaralafco.org/images/resumes/agenda_packet/StaffReport_20160215.pdf)



## CASE STUDY: STANISLAUS COUNTY

PHOTO CREDIT: STANISLAUS LAFCO

### BACKGROUND

Stanislaus County is a relatively rural county containing nine cities, located in California's Central Valley. Its largest city is Modesto, with a population of 212,175 in 2016. Recognizing the diversity in population size and growth management policies among the County's nine cities, the LAFCo Executive Officer, Sara Lytle-Pinhey explains that the Commission employs a "menu approach" to growth management practices. For example, the City of Hughson has a 2-to-1 agricultural mitigation policy in place, while the City of Newman has drawn an urban growth boundary. The County also requires a countywide vote to approve zoning changes from agricultural to residential use, and requires 1-to-1 mitigation for the loss of agricultural land when such developments are approved in the unincorporated areas. The LAFCo recognizes and upholds each of these policies and requires cities to provide a plan for agricultural land preservation as well as an absorption study<sup>6</sup> and a vacant land inventory with each request for a land annexation or SOI expansion.

In addition to upholding growth management policies held by each of the cities and the County, Stanislaus LAFCo establishes SOIs within its jurisdiction that are intended to reflect where growth may occur in a 20-year timeframe. Cities are expected to maintain this planning

boundary and any modifications require careful review by the LAFCo. Additionally, the LAFCo sets a primary area around cities that represents the near-term growth area within the first 10 years of that period.

### AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION PLAN

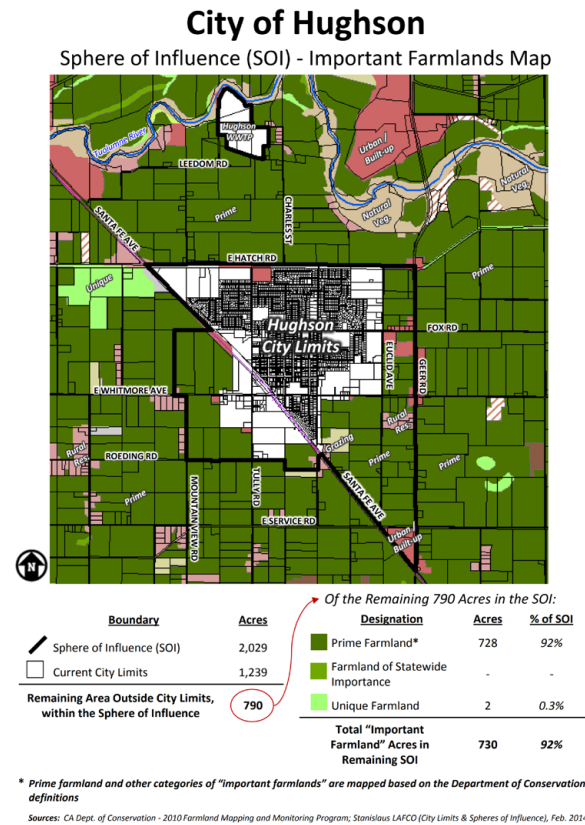
The LAFCo's role of ensuring orderly development is not easy considering that the cities in the County have varying degrees of growth management policies in place. Furthermore, each of the cities is surrounded by prime agricultural land (as defined by the California Department of Conservation), in some cases making it difficult for cities to grow in size at all without developing over fertile farmland. In an effort to address this challenge, the LAFCo set in place a policy in 2012 requiring cities to provide an agricultural preservation plan along with their requests to annex land or expand their SOI. These plans must include an analysis of the extent to which local agricultural resources would be impacted by the proposed development, a vacant land inventory and absorption study, and an analysis of possible agricultural land mitigation, among other items. The preservation plan must also demonstrate consistency with the region's Sustainable Communities Strategy, as well as other regional, local and countywide plans.

While various factors make it challenging to completely avoid the development of prime agricultural land, the LAFCo published a report in 2014 that mapped prime agricultural lands (as defined by the California Department

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<sup>6</sup> The absorption study is expected to include information about the city's demand for various land uses, its current supply, and the rate of expected growth or absorption of lands.

**FIGURE 3: MAP OF THE CITY OF HUGHSON FROM STANISLAUS LAFCO'S 2014 "CITY SPHERES OF INFLUENCE" REPORT**



Source: Stanislaus LAFCo

of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program Tool) within and around the SOI of each jurisdiction, thus informing the public of the agricultural lands in the County that are in danger of being developed within the next 20 years. In 2010, the LAFCo also published a 50-year summary report, with tables showing the growth of city boundaries and spheres of influence over time, changes in population and population density, and the average annual growth rate for each city. By making this data public and accessible, the LAFCo informs the public on the state of growth management in the County.

Stanislaus LAFCo also participates in frequent conversation between city and county planning directors through a monthly "Planning Directors Association" meeting. This helps build relationships among the cities, County and LAFCo in a way that encourages collaboration and frequent communication about issues related to

land use in the County. Each year, the Planning Director's Association hosts an educational workshop for all the planning commissioners in the County to share best practices and spark conversation about issues related to planning and growth management.

### OUTCOMES

Stanislaus LAFCo has observed that nearly every city in the County has adopted a policy that either acknowledges the need for applicants to prepare a Plan for Agricultural Preservation or establishes its own strategy for agricultural preservation. Likewise, city general plan updates, specific plans, and their associated environmental documents that have been prepared since adoption of the LAFCo policy have all recognized the need for a Plan for Agricultural Preservation. The LAFCo also notes that cities and developers have initiated discussions with the LAFCo much earlier in their processes in order to better understand expectations during their preparation of a Plan for Agricultural Preservation.

So far, Stanislaus LAFCo has only received a handful of annexation applications that have needed to prepare an Agricultural Plan, which itself could be a positive outcome of the new policy. Consequentially, agricultural mitigation stemming from this policy has been relatively minimal so far, but the existence of the policy may help deter development in unincorporated areas of the County, while also conserving valuable farmland in perpetuity.

### TOOLS UTILIZED

- » Monthly Planning Directors Association meetings between city and county planning directors and LAFCo, including an education workshop for all the planning commissioners in the County to share updates
- » Voter-approved Urban Growth Boundary (City of Newman)
- » Agricultural Preservation Plan required for annexation and SOI expansion requests
- » Agricultural mitigation requirements for Stanislaus County and some cities

## DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

- » Strong agricultural heritage of the region
- » Individual commissioners who prioritize agricultural land conservation
- » Frequent meeting and communication
- » Transparent and informative website

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Stanislaus' rural geography and strong agricultural heritage are emblematic of the region. While this is a boon for farming in the County, it also presents the challenge that nearly any development on the fringes of Stanislaus County's nine cities is likely to threaten prime farmland. Thus the stakes for growth management in the County are particularly high.

The cities in Stanislaus County have varying degrees of growth management policies currently in place. For example, while the City of Newman passed a voter-approved urban growth boundary in 2014, a similar measure failed to pass in the City of Modesto the following year. Additionally, the County's growth management policies require one-to-one mitigation for agricultural land, but only when the land is developed for residential use. The policy does not apply to industrial or commercial uses, leaving farmlands vulnerable to development in many cases.

While these factors all present challenges for implementing effective growth management, Stanislaus LAFCo's policies help minimize the loss of farmland and promote orderly growth. By encouraging communication and collaboration among various actors in the County and promoting transparency through clear reporting on growth patterns of cities in the county, the LAFCo has taken initiative to influence the factors within its control.

## USEFUL LINKS:

- » Stanislaus LAFCo's agricultural land preservation policy: <http://www.stanislausLAFCo.org/info/PDF/Policy/Final.AgPolicy.3252015.pdf>
- » City of Newman's Urban Growth Boundary Measure: <http://www.cityofnewman.com/docman/administration/662-measure-z-information/file.html>
- » City Spheres of Influence Report: <http://www.stanislausLAFCo.org/info/PDF/SOI/SOIRReport2014.pdf>
- » 50-Year Annual City Annexation Summary: <http://www.stanislausLAFCo.org/info/PDF/Staff%20Rpts/AnnualCityAnnex12.31.10.pdf>





## CASE STUDY: VENTURA COUNTY

PHOTO CREDIT: VENTURA LAFCO

### BACKGROUND

Ventura County has a long history of enacting measures aimed at protecting its agricultural character from sprawl development. As early as 1967, the County approved a Greenbelt Agreement between the cities of Ventura and Santa Paula under which parties agreed to a policy of non-annexation and non-urban development in the agricultural lands located between the two cities. By 1986, five more agreements had been passed by other cities and the County (Fulton et al., 2003). While these greenbelts are not legally binding, Ventura LAFCo has endorsed these agreements and made a commitment to reject a proposal from a city that is in conflict with a greenbelt agreement, “unless exceptional circumstances are shown to exist” (Commissioners Handbook Section 3.2.4.4).

Another important element of Ventura County’s success in protecting agricultural land is its *Guidelines for Orderly Development (GOD)*, which was first adopted in 1969<sup>7</sup> by the LAFCo, the County and each of the cities within the County. This document is a unique effort to encourage urban development within cities, enhance the regional responsibility of County government, and facilitate orderly planning and development. The *GOD* was influential in setting a County policy that discouraged development outside of city limits, providing an important precedent for later initiatives. Ventura LAFCo’s Executive

7 The document was updated in 1996

Officer, Kai Luoma, pointed out that “The Guidelines have been, and still remain, very influential and are routinely applied throughout the County.” He explained that County staff routinely refer proposed developments to LAFCo and city staff to advise on their compliance with the Guidelines.

### THE SOAR MOVEMENT

Momentum to protect agricultural land increased in the 1980s with Ventura County’s Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources (SOAR) movement. This grassroots campaign was led by local residents concerned about environmental degradation, sprawl, and increased traffic in their communities (Ryan et al. 2004). The first SOAR initiative was approved by the City of Ventura in 1995, building on the existing growth management policies described above. Since then, seven others have been enacted around all of the major cities in Ventura County, as well as in the County’s unincorporated areas. The County’s SOAR initiative requires approval from a majority of County voters in order to rezone unincorporated open space, agricultural or rural land for development. The eight voter-approved SOAR initiatives passed by the cities of Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Oxnard, Santa Paula, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks and Ventura, made it necessary to obtain approval from city voters before allowing most types of urban development beyond a City Urban Restriction Boundary (CURB). In the case of the City of Ventura, a vote is required in order to

rezone land designated as agricultural land in the City's general plan. All of the existing SOAR initiatives were recently reaffirmed through 2050 by voters in November 2016.<sup>8</sup> The renewed County initiative added an exemption for processing of locally grown food to support the agricultural industry. The LAFCo plays an important role through supporting and upholding voter-approved SOAR policies in its decision-making.

Another, more recent, example of the LAFCo's role in natural and working land conservation is its development of *Informational Guidelines for the Consideration of Agricultural Mitigation Measures*, providing guidance to lead agencies on mitigation strategies for projects that are likely to result in the conversion of prime agricultural land. The document lists the four following recommended measures: agricultural conservation easements, agricultural land mitigation bank and credits, fee title (ownership), or fees in lieu of the three previously mentioned strategies.

## OUTCOMES

The SOAR initiatives and GOD document have been largely successful in directing development towards cities and existing urban areas. As they are not outright prohibitions on development, these policies have led to more thoughtful deliberations among disparate interests, as developers have had to convince voters directly of the benefit of each project.

Santa Paula's East Area 1 Specific Plan is a good example of the City's SOAR initiative in action. In 2004, the City of Santa Paula signed an MOU with the agribusiness Limoneira for the development of Teague McKeveatt Ranch, a 501-acre ranch contiguous to the City's eastern boundary. The MOU required robust community engagement in the creation of a specific plan to ensure that the project responded to community needs. Taking into account community feedback, the specific plan included both neighborhood and community parks and trails, in addition to local schools and new residences. The plan was unanimously approved by the City Council and

***“Because of SOAR, residents have found a new, sustainable way to grow that bucks the trend of urban sprawl.”***

Planning Commission, at which point the annexation was submitted to a City-wide vote and was overwhelmingly approved by 83% of voters. Since the project site was located in an existing greenbelt, Limoneira was required to mitigate impacts by purchasing a 34-acre agricultural easement located within the City's Area of Interest. The annexation was approved by Ventura LAFCo in 2011.

As shown in this example, SOAR initiatives in the County are strengthened by LAFCo policies that reinforce earlier efforts of Ventura County and its cities to preserve agricultural lands and focus urban growth inside of existing communities. This alignment of efforts results in orderly growth that responds to community needs. In the words of Supervisor Linda Parks, who is on the Ventura LAFCo Commission as well as the board of SOAR, “Because of SOAR, residents have found a new, sustainable way to grow that bucks the trend of urban sprawl.”

## TOOLS UTILIZED

- » Greenbelts
- » City Urban Restriction Boundaries
- » SOAR Initiatives
- » Guidelines for Orderly Development
- » Informational Guidelines for the Consideration of Agricultural Mitigation Measures

<sup>8</sup> SOAR Website.

<http://www.soarvc.org/what-is-soar/> [accessed 2/26/2018]

## DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

- » Strong agricultural history of the region
- » Active local advocates and community organizers
- » Prioritization of agricultural land conservation among LAFCo commissioners
- » Strong early growth management policies set the foundation for later ones
- » Alignment of policies across jurisdictions
- » Successful relationships with cities, special districts and the County

## CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Jurisdictions' ability to pass local SOAR initiatives depends on the extent to which the electorate prioritizes the conservation of agricultural land. Thus, local education about the issue is crucial to success. The presence of strong environmental advocates and community organizers combined with the significant agricultural history of Ventura County were instrumental in passing these SOAR initiatives in the 1990s, and in successfully campaigning for their renewal to 2050. While SOAR does not keep a city from annexing land, it does require a vote of the people to change a City Urban Restriction Boundary and allow for development. Ventura LAFCo has a policy to not accept applications for annexation unless voters have approved amending the City Urban Restriction Boundary. This LAFCo policy, along with enforcement of greenbelt agreements, complements SOAR initiatives well. Lastly, since the LAFCo only has jurisdiction over boundary changes, agricultural land conversion does not always fall under its purview. To address this challenge, the LAFCo's guidelines for agricultural land mitigation encourage lead agencies to consider mitigation in cases of agricultural land conversion when reviewing environmental impact assessments.

**1,023,473** TOTAL ACRES  
unincorporated land protected by  
SOAR initiatives in Ventura County

**92,635** ACRES  
Agricultural / Agricultural – Urban Reserve

**921,770** ACRES  
Open Space / Open Space – Urban Reserve

**9,068** ACRES  
Rural / Rural – Urban Reserve

## USEFUL LINKS

- » Ventura County Guidelines for Orderly Development: <http://www.ventura.LAFCo.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2005-GuidelineOD-1.pdf>
- » Informational Guidelines for the Consideration of Agricultural Mitigation Measures: <http://www.ventura.LAFCo.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Final-Version-of-Mitigation-Guidelines.pdf>
- » Ventura County SOAR website: <http://www.soarvc.org/>
- » Commissioners Handbook: <http://www.ventura.LAFCo.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Ventura-LAF-Co-Commissioners-Handbook-Revised-7-19-17.pdf>
- » Ventura County website: <http://www.ventura.org/>
- » Ventura County Resource Management Agency website: <https://vcrma.org/>
- » Santa Paula's East Area 1 Specific Plan <https://www.scribd.com/document/50982927/Santa-Paula-s-East-Area-1-Specific-Plan>



## CASE STUDY: SONOMA COUNTY

### BACKGROUND

Given its location in the northern San Francisco Bay Area and desirable climate, Sonoma County has long grappled with development pressures. In order to preserve its natural heritage, the County set forth a visionary and highly controversial General Plan in 1978 to focus growth in cities while conserving farmlands and natural resource areas. Then, beginning in 1989, Sonoma County also created Community Separators, which serve as green buffers between cities. While Community Separators do not affect underlying land use designations for the area they cover, they are generally located outside of USAs and are designated with agricultural, resource or rural residential land uses. In the 1990s, voters approved the creation of an Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District as well as the strengthening of Community Separator policies to require a vote of the people in order to change the zoning or modify the boundaries of these areas. In 2016, Sonoma County voters overwhelmingly approved a measure to renew and expand the eight existing Community Separators in the County.

The nine cities in the County have also done their part to manage growth. In 1996, the overwhelming voter approval of urban growth boundaries (UGBs) in Santa Rosa and Sebastopol began a wave of similar policies in the remaining cities in the County. Cloverdale was the last to pass its own UGB in 2010. Most of these voter initiatives expire after 20 years (Cloverdale's in 15 years) and have so far been overwhelmingly reapproved by voters.

### LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Sonoma LAFCo plays an important role in supporting these local growth management policies. The LAFCo often gets requests from landowners wanting to subdivide their property and asking for an outside service area agreement, but the LAFCo upholds State law (Government Code §56133) that only allows for such extensions of services in the case of an “existing or impending threat to the health or safety of the public or the residents of the affected territory.” Executive Officer Mark Bramfitt also emphasizes that approving ad-hoc service area expansions would likely lead to increased development on the outskirts of Sonoma County’s cities, which would undermine local growth management goals.

The LAFCo also upholds local UGBs and Community Separators in the case of proposals that would not be consistent and maintains close relationships with the local cities and the County. Annexation or SOI expansion proposals that are inconsistent with its policies rarely make it through an initial screening process and on to the LAFCo Commissioners. Instead, such proposals are determined inconsistent with local land use policy by the cities or the County at a much earlier stage. Sonoma County Comprehensive Planning Manager Jane Riley explained that the County’s relationship with the LAFCo is beneficial, explaining that working closely together over the years has ensured smooth communication and a consistent approach.

Sonoma LAFCo also has a strong relationship with the cities within its countywide jurisdiction. The LAFCo's executive officer explains the issues that he works on with cities are fairly minor; cities and special districts sometimes have questions about process, but they all share the same goals of focusing growth within existing cities. The LAFCo's relationship with the County, cities and special districts also includes a good deal of day-to-day education and collaboration. This interaction is largely informal and happens when LAFCo staff consult these local entities on specific projects, proposals and applications. In addition to this daily communication, the LAFCo held a two-hour "LAFCO 101" training for city and County planning staff members in 2017, which was well-received.

### OUTCOMES

The County's Community Separator and the UGBs implemented by every city in the County have created a strong framework for efficient development that can be an instructive practice for cities and counties across the State. This strong foundation is reinforced by Sonoma LAFCo's commitment to uphold these policies, as well as its close relationship with the County, cities and special districts. Its role in providing day-to-day education about the importance of growth management, and the policies in place to that end, is also instrumental in promoting infill development and the protection of natural and

***“Sonoma LAFCo is a strong model for other LAFCos around the state in terms of working with cities and counties and acting when needed to prevent sprawl and loss of farmland and open space to inappropriate development.”***

# 10 COMMUNITY SEPARATORS THAT PROTECT OVER 50,000 ACRES of natural and working lands

working lands in Sonoma County. According to Teri Shore, North Bay Regional Director at the Greenbelt Alliance, “Sonoma LAFCo is a strong model for other LAFCos around the state in terms of working with cities and counties and acting when needed to prevent sprawl and loss of farmland and open space to inappropriate development.”

### TOOLS UTILIZED

- » Urban Growth Boundaries
- » Community Separator Ordinance
- » Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District
- » Communication and Relationship Building

### DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

- » Agricultural heritage of the region
- » Constituents that prioritize the preservation of natural and working lands
- » Strong relationships with the County, cities, and special districts
- » Strong city and county growth management policies

### CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In the wake of the fires that tore through Sonoma County in 2017, destroying approximately 6,000 housing units in the County, the LAFCo's role has become more important than ever. As the County looks to rebuild, this increased demand for housing need presents a formidable challenge in a region that, like most areas in California, had already struggled to meet local housing needs. The County Board

of Supervisors is calling for the construction of 30,000 new units in the next five years to rebuild the homes that were lost while also addressing the housing shortage that pre-dates these historic fires. While the County and cities are committed to concentrating this growth within city limits, it is an unprecedented level of growth for the County and may not be easy to contain. So far, the County plans to meet this target without substantially changing current policies, but community opposition may complicate dense development of some areas, making it harder to achieve this goal. The LAFCo can be a key player in ensuring that growth management policies are followed even – and especially – in the face of significant growth.

### **USEFUL LINKS**

- » Sonoma LAFCo: <http://www.sonomaLAFCo.org/>
- » Map of Sonoma County Protected Lands: <http://www.sonomaopenspace.org/lands/>
- » Sonoma County General Plan: <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/PRMD/Long-Range-Plans/General-Plan/>
- » Sonoma County Agriculture and Open Space District: <http://www.sonomaopenspace.org/>
- » Bay Area Greenprint: <https://www.bayareagreenprint.org/>

## PART V

# RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

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As highlighted in these four case studies and doubtless many other examples of local best practices, there are a number of ways for LAFCoS, cities, counties and special districts to work together to implement effective smart growth practices on the local level. For example, setting up regular meetings between local city and county planning departments that include educational presentations and trainings like Stanislaus County does is a powerful technique. The State General Plan Guidelines, and CALAFCO and American Farmland Trust's "State of the Art on Agricultural Preservation," provide detailed policy guidance on best practices to encourage efficient growth management that may provide a useful starting point for discussing appropriate policies to implement locally. Sonoma LAFCo's efforts to educate local agencies on what LAFCoS do and clarify roles between LAFCo staff and city and county staff can also help streamline collaborative efforts and help conserve precious staff time.

In addition to regular meetings and trainings for planning staff of all local agencies, frequent conversation and collaboration can help build a culture of trust across agencies and make it easier to achieve common goals. Working at the intersection of cities, counties, special districts and regional governments, LAFCoS have the opportunity to help facilitate relationship building and collaboration on growth management among these entities.

MPOs and COGs are critical players that have much to gain from deepening relationships with LAFCoS and local agencies. By engaging these local agencies in the development and updates to the SCS for the region, regional governments can ensure local buy-in and build momentum around smart growth practices. For local agencies, collaborating with MPOs on the development of these plans can help align local and regional goals and make it easier for cities, counties, special districts and LAFCoS to adhere to SCSs in their decision-making.

Another strategy that can help local agencies and LAFCoS meet their smart growth goals is education of the general public about the importance of growth management through building relationships with non-traditional partners. These entities may include community-based organizations, advocacy organizations, land trusts, farmer's unions, open space authorities, small businesses and other organizations whose missions align with the implementation of infill development and protection of agricultural land. This type of coalition-building is important for building consensus and momentum around strong agricultural land protection and smart growth.

Local agencies and LAFCoS also have much to gain by creating accessible websites, along with publications and communications documents that clearly explain the benefits of smart growth in everyday parlance and highlight local efforts to encourage sustainable development patterns. In addition, sharing data on the amount and location of prime agricultural land in the county, land area that has been protected through agricultural easements or the Williamson Act, city growth rates over time, and other key data points can empower local advocates and organizations to promote growth management efforts.

Developing relationships with press and communicating with them about local efforts to create more vibrant, walkable cities while protecting natural and working lands is another meaningful way to educate the public about the importance of this work. Many of the strongest growth management policies highlighted in the case studies were voter initiatives, or were passed by elected leaders who are responsible for representing their constituents. Without convincing the public of the value of encouraging infill development and protecting open space, local agencies and LAFCoS will struggle to meet their goals of effective growth management.

Many of the stakeholders that were interviewed for this paper indicated that the vital role LAFCoS play in their counties is not often understood by the general public – and is sometimes even misunderstood by the organizations and individuals that LAFCoS interact with regularly. This presents an opportunity for LAFCoS and their local agency partners to take an active role in educating stakeholders on LAFCoS' mission, explaining how their vision for efficient growth management aligns with the sustainable land use policies and decisions of local cities, counties and special districts.



## PART VI

# STATE TOOLS AND SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE SMART GROWTH

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The State of California has created a variety of strategic plans and guidance documents that can help provide a framework for local growth management strategies. The Scoping Plan is California's roadmap for meeting our ambitious climate goals. In addition to setting the path forward to meeting 2030 climate targets, it also highlights the key strategies that are needed in order to reach these goals. Preservation of farmland and open space, including forests and wetlands, and promoting infill development are integral components of the State's climate strategy.

While the Scoping Plan provides the overarching framework for reaching the State's Climate goals, it does not address the more granular details of what that might look like on the local level. The Office of Planning and Research provides more applied guidance to local jurisdictions on how to implement these goals through its *General Plan Guidelines*. This document is a primary resource for local governments to prepare their general plans and update local land use goals, policies, and actions. Statutory mandates, guidance, and recommendations are all included in the document and recent updates in 2017 include recommended policies and mapping tools. Smart growth is a critical part to successful land use management in California. The newest version of the General Plan Guidelines highlights this as a priority in a number of sections, including in land use, transportation, air quality, healthy communities, climate change, and implementation. Importantly, these Guidelines include examples of counties where specific practices are being implemented, to encourage effective leverage of these practices. LAFCo are an important local player who should be consulted during General Plan updates. By encouraging jurisdictions to utilize the General Plan Guidelines and suggesting the use of best practices they highlight, LAFCos can advance strong local and countywide planning practices. It is important to note

that the Scoping Plan and General Plan Guidelines are non-regulatory documents – they are meant to be helpful resources that can assist local agencies in planning for a sustainable, resilient, and prosperous future.

Another way for LAFCos to engage with local agencies to meet common goals is through educating and potentially partnering with local jurisdictions to attract State grant funding to help meet smart growth goals. These funds include the suite of *California Climate Investments* programs that are funded through the State's Cap-and-Trade program, as well as funding available for water investments through the *Water Quality, Supply and Infrastructure Improvement Act* (Proposition 1); dollars for transportation investments through the *Road Repair and Accountability Act*<sup>9</sup> (Senate Bill 1); and new funds for parks and environmental protection available through the *Parks, Environment, and Water Bond* (Proposition 68). Cities and counties would be well served to partner with LAFCos on relevant grant proposals to help build LAFCo capacity and improve local coordination to meet collective goals. For example, it may be helpful to include LAFCo as a subgrantee on a planning grant to update a local Municipal Service Review or to help with planning for a disadvantaged unincorporated community.

The State's Cap-and-Trade program in particular has a number of programs aimed at reducing GHG emissions through smart growth. Programs such as the *Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program*, the *Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program* and the *Transformative Climate Communities Program* can help local jurisdictions employ agricultural land preservation and infill development strategies to help reduce GHG emissions. The Strategic Growth Council's *Technical Assistance Program* is also available to

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<sup>9</sup> A measure to repeal this bill is slated to be on the November 2018 ballot. If passed, this funding source would no longer be available.

help local jurisdictions – particularly those that classify as disadvantaged or low income communities<sup>10</sup> – identify grant programs that could be a good fit for community needs and provide direct application assistance. See the resources section of this paper for more information about these programs and others.

Senate Bill 73, an element of the 2017 legislative Housing Package allows local governments to create Housing Sustainability Districts. These districts will be located in areas with existing infrastructure and transit and zoned at higher densities to encourage more infill development. Environmental review must be conducted prior to the approval of the district designation, allowing for ministerial approval once the new zoning is in place. Cities will be provided funding incentives to establish these districts. The Housing Package also included *Senate Bill 35*, which creates a streamlined approval process for infill housing developments in localities that have failed to meet their regional housing needs assessment targets. While these pieces of legislation do not affect LAFCoS directly, they provide powerful incentives for cities to focus efforts on smart growth and may be helpful in convincing cities to address the growing housing pressures in California through increased infill development rather than suburban sprawl.

Additionally, State legislation (AB 2087) creating *Regional Conservation Investment Strategies* went into effect in January 2017, encouraging voluntary regional planning processes which are intended to result in higher-quality conservation outcomes. One goal is to direct the placement of development and infrastructure, as well as identify optimal locations for habitat mitigation. Several pilots are nearing completion around the State, including in Santa Clara County. LAFCoS and counties in particular should be involved in these planning processes and/or aware of the resulting conservation strategies, which can support them in their own efforts to guide development.

Lastly, the State of California has partnered with the land use scenario planning software company *UrbanFootprint* to make this scenario planning tool available to all

cities, counties and metropolitan planning organizations in the State free-of-charge. This tool provides planners with informative projections of how land use scenarios will affect a variety of economic and environmental indicators, such as tax revenue, infrastructure costs, energy costs, agricultural land conservation, protection of biodiversity, water use, GHG reductions and air pollution, and more. Not only can UrbanFootprint be a powerful tool to help planners draft effective General Plans, it can also help with local decision-making around development and conservation of land, thereby supporting a stronger relationship between LAFCoS and local jurisdictions. When decision-makers and the public alike are presented with strong data showing that decisions to annex land or expand urban services to undeveloped areas may not only have negative environmental impacts, but economic ones as well, it can be much easier to refuse development that runs contrary to the public's interest.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of some clear challenges, cities, counties, and special districts, supported by LAFCoS and regional agencies, have an opportunity to move the needle on building a healthier and more sustainable California. By educating local decision-makers, local agencies and the public about the importance of focusing development in existing communities while protecting farmlands and open space, they can build local support for smart growth policies. Looking to non-traditional partners in this effort may be a helpful way to reach new audiences and strengthen existing efforts that share similar goals. LAFCoS can also work as conveners and facilitators, bringing together local agencies and helping to foster a culture of trust in their counties. Strong, well-reasoned policies that enjoy broad-based support are also a critical ingredient. In this paper, we have highlighted a number of successful best practices from around the State, but there are doubtless many more. We hope that the State tools and resources offered here will provide LAFCoS, cities, counties, special districts and other local agencies with the information they need to protect Californians from the effects of climate change, while improving public health, the economy, and quality of life in our beautiful State.

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<sup>10</sup> Disadvantaged Communities are designated according to their CalEnviroScreen scores. Low-income communities are determined according to the Assembly Bill 1550 definition.

# RESOURCES

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## LEGISLATION CITED

**Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 (Assembly Bill 743):** Establishes procedures for local government changes of organization, including city incorporations, annexations to a city or special district, and city and special district consolidations.

**California’s Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 (Assembly Bill 32):** Requires California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 — a reduction of approximately 15 percent below emissions expected under a “business as usual” scenario.

**Senate Bill 375:** Directs the Air Resources Board to set regional targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and for Metropolitan Planning Organizations or Councils of Government to create Sustainable Communities Strategies that plan for the attainment of these targets.

**Senate Bill 535:** Directs State and local agencies to make investments that benefit California’s disadvantaged communities. It also directs the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) to identify disadvantaged communities for the purposes of these investments based on geographic, socio-economic, public health, and environmental hazard criteria.

**Assembly Bill 1550:** Increased the percent of funds for projects located in disadvantaged communities from 10 to 25 percent and added a focus on investments in low-income communities and households.

**Assembly Bill 2087:** Creates Regional Conservation Investment Strategies, which encourage voluntary regional planning processes which are intended to result in higher-quality conservation outcomes.

**Assembly Bill 73:** Provides local governments the option of creating “Housing Sustainability Districts,” which operate as overlay districts to streamline the residential development process in areas with existing infrastructure and transit.

**Senate Bill 35:** Creates a streamlined, ministerial approval process for infill developments in localities that have failed to meet their regional housing needs assessment (RHNA) targets.

## USEFUL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

CalEnviroScreen 3.0:

<https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen>

California Climate Investments:

<http://www.caclimateinvestments.ca.gov/>

2015 Environmental Goals and Policy Report:

[http://www.opr.ca.gov/docs/EGPR\\_Nov\\_2015.pdf](http://www.opr.ca.gov/docs/EGPR_Nov_2015.pdf)

General Plan Guidelines:

<http://opr.ca.gov/planning/general-plan/>

LAFCOs, General Plans and City Annexations:

[http://opr.ca.gov/docs/LAFCOs\\_GeneralPlans\\_City\\_Annexations.pdf](http://opr.ca.gov/docs/LAFCOs_GeneralPlans_City_Annexations.pdf)

Municipal Service Review Guidelines:

<http://opr.ca.gov/docs/MSRGuidelines.pdf>

UrbanFootprint: <https://urbanfootprint.com/>

Scoping Plan:

<https://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/scopingplan/scopingplan.htm>

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# CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

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The **Strategic Growth Council (SGC)** was established in 2008 to coordinate state agency activities in supporting the planning and development of sustainable communities. The SGC also administers a suite of grant programs funded through the California Climate Investments - a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions while providing a variety of other impactful benefits - particularly in disadvantaged communities.

The **California Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR)** was established in 1970 to serve the Governor and their Cabinet as staff for long-range planning and research, and constitutes the comprehensive state planning agency. OPR is required to develop long-range policies to assist the state and local agencies in meeting the problems presented by the growth and development of urban areas and defining the complementary roles of the state, cities, counties, school districts, and special districts with respect to such growth. OPR is also charged with assisting local government in land use decisions, conflict resolution among state agencies, creation and adoption of general plan guidelines, operation of the State Clearinghouse for distribution and review of CEQA documents, operation of the Integrated Climate Adaptation and Resiliency Program, and a number of other responsibilities.

The **California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions (CALAFCO)** is a 501(c)3 non-profit founded in 1971. CALAFCO serves as an organization dedicated to assisting member LAFCoS with educational, technical and legislative resources that otherwise would not be available. The Association provides state-wide coordination of LAFCo activities, serves as a resource to the Legislature and other bodies, and offers a structure for sharing information among the various LAFCoS and other governmental agencies. The membership of CALAFCO consists of all 58 of the LAFCoS in California, along with an associate membership of firms and agencies which support the educational mission of the organization.

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