

## COUNTY'S OPEN SPACE VANISHING

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Build, build, build vs. preserve open space and agricultural land! This is the crossroads at which Ventura County finds itself—once again. Except this time, so much building has occurred—since the last time the question was seriously debated—that many people are asking: "When is 'enough' enough?" Whether we like it or not, finding the answer to that question, regarding "enough building," including where any new building should be allowed to be built (or not) is what Ventura County residents and public officials are grappling with.

The way we answer the question will shape our future for generations to come. Most Ventura County residents are proud to say they live in a county which has historically withstood the pressures to build or lay concrete on almost every inch of "available" land. Ask almost anyone who lives here, and they'll probably say: "Ventura County is different. It has a policy to keep open spaces between cities. That's why we live here. We don't believe in forever destroying all the open spaces and becoming another Orange or Los Angeles County."

But are we still different? Do we still value preserving agricultural and open space lands as much as before? Recent evidence is mixed. Sincere people disagree. As more and more open space is bulldozed into extinction, the pressure to build continues to mount. And what are we doing about it? Remember the line in the old folk song: "Don't it always seem to go—that you don't know what you've got till it's gone?"

Consider this from the 1995 edition of *California Land Use and Planning Law*: "The primary purpose of the open space element of a general plan 'is [t]o assure that cities and counties recognize that open space land is a limited and valuable resource which must be conserved wherever possible' (Gov't code § 65562(a)) and to discourage '... unnecessary conversion of open space land to urban uses...' (Gov't code § 65561(b))."

Those who wish to preserve open space and ag lands point to the recent passage of Measure I in Ventura as a mandate to Save Our Agricultural Resources. They also point to the 11,000+ acres of public natural open space in Thousand Oaks—as a good sign that we publicly value our open space lands. In Simi Valley, it's a different story. Even if you count holdings of the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District (RSRPD), there are currently less than 2,000 acres of natural open space being preserved there. Almost all the land you might think is preserved as open space is, in effect, just waiting for development.

Are we saving enough, compared to how much we are destroying for development? Critics in both Simi Valley and Thousand Oaks complain that each city is not preserving enough. Consider, for example, the recent approvals of Whiteface (Simi Valley) and Seventh Day Adventist (Newbury Park). Both are scheduled to destroy significant open space lands against the better judgment of many. At the same time, others applaud these projects as totally appropriate development.

The County made a deal to gain 10,000 acres of prime parkland including pristine canyons which might otherwise be "developed" in exchange for permission to build the mammoth Ahmanson Ranch project (thousands of homes, and a new mini-city in a previously undeveloped area). Some called it a victory for preserving open space. Others? —a bitter defeat—saying it does not save enough open space and gives away far too many of our precious natural resources to the crush of new development.

And what about Moorpark? Our newest city is on pace to gobble up about 10,000 acres now zoned open space inside the city or its area of interest, all for new development. The City's own Quarterly Development Status Report (9/95) shows **2,718** dwelling units on the books right now (either under construction, already approved, or working through Moorpark's approval process). These are all inside present city limits—without even considering other projects outside the city limits! The biggest proposal is the Hidden Creek Ranch (Messenger Project), with its planned 3,221 homes and related "services"—all in a largely unspoiled area not now inside the Moorpark city limits. Did you know that Hidden Creek would be bigger than Ahmanson Ranch, but promises no 10,000 acre open space parkland guarantee to even try to compensate for building it?

If the people of Moorpark allow Hidden Creek to be approved and annexed, it would increase the size of the city by 60%, forever change the city's beautiful backdrop, and choke Eastern Ventura County with a host of detrimental impacts—not to mention impacts to the rest of the county. At the December 1995 meeting to examine the County's Guidelines for Orderly Development, the question was raised about what the county would do if Moorpark turned down the Hidden Creek Project. Supervisors Mikels and Kildee reported clearly that the county would turn it down too, saying it would be against the intent of the Guidelines to do otherwise.

Hidden Creek is on county land, is currently zoned open space and agriculture, is restricted to allow no more than 108 dwelling units on its 4,000+ acres, and just happens to be located in the wildlife corridor right next to a wilderness preserve (Happy Camp Canyon Regional Park)—all at the western end of the Santa Susana Mountains. Add what Simi Valley's already approved Whiteface project, plus it's Alamos Canyon industrial west end plan is going to destroy in open space in the Santa Susana range to what Hidden Creek would destroy (right next to it), and you can see what will happen if all these projects are permitted as currently proposed:

1. The supposed open space buffer between Simi Valley and Moorpark will be essentially gone.
2. The quality of life for everyone in this county will be forever degraded, not just for those in Moorpark and Simi Valley.
3. The viability of the wildlife corridor between Happy Camp's wilderness preserve, the rest of the Santa Susana Mountains, and the Simi Hills could be forever lost.

Henry David Thoreau said: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." When will we ever learn? The survival of our own species (*Homo Sapiens*) is dependent on the survival of thousands of other species too, who just happen to live somewhere in that remaining open space we have not yet "developed." Contrary to what some people say, "progress" is not necessarily measured in how much building is in an area. Rather, it is measured in how much we take care of the needs of all living things—human and non-human.

Moorpark voters, it's up to us! The Moorpark General Plan Open Space Element says: "The importance of open space resources is based on priorities established by the citizens of Moorpark." If this is really true (as it should be), then Moorpark has an obligation to allow its citizens to vote for or against any project that will forever destroy large amounts of open space, as Hidden Creek Ranch and many other current Moorpark proposals will do, if ever built.

Other voters, it's up to you too. Make your elected officials give you a chance to vote on important open space issues. Otherwise, we may all lose most of our remaining open space, which gives us so much of our current quality of life.

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