

(Note: This was published in the October 6, 1996 issue of the *Ventura County Star* [page D6 as a commentary]; The title below was used by the *Star* in its publication. Dr. Mikos' own working title upon submittal was: "Farmland and Open Space Preservation")

Citizens must take the lead in preservation

Do we need farmland and open space protection laws in Ventura County? You bet we do—and not just in the currently designated “greenbelts.” Unfortunately, we don’t have enough greenbelts for all the areas that should be protected. And the greenbelts we do have are too often violated. Agriculture and open space are literally under attack by speculative development both here and in California’s biggest breadbasket—the Central Valley.

Indeed, farmland and open space throughout the USA are in serious jeopardy. Acre after acre of what used to be California’s farmland, grazing land, and open space are being paved over, with little thought for the long term detrimental consequences of forever losing it.

According to the American Farmland Trust (Fall, 1995) we lose two acres of farmland every minute of every day in the United States! A USDA National Resources Inventory (1992) reported that in California alone:

- 20,530 acres of prime and unique farmland is lost to urbanization per year.
- The total amount of all farmland lost to urbanization is 80,010 acres per year.
- Only 3,128 acres of farmland are permanently protected from urbanization per year.

What is wrong with that picture?

The Fall, 1995 issue of *American Farmland* devoted its entire issue to the problem and should be required reading for all elected officials. The cover story, “Harvest or Homes?” reminds us that the county with the nation’s highest agricultural production just 45 year ago, was none other than Los Angeles County, California. We all know what happened there. The Santa Clara Valley gave way to the “Silicon Valley;” and, most of Orange County was paved over seemingly before people realized what had happened.

Is this what we have to look forward to in Ventura County and in the Central Valley? The telltale signs of repeating all the past mistakes are already showing. What will we do this time?

The Ventura County Agricultural Land Trust, in cooperation with the California State Coastal Conservancy and the University of California published *The Value of Agriculture to Ventura County: An Economic Analysis* in March, 1996. The two conclusions made were (1) that agriculture plays a very significant role in Ventura County’s economy; and (2) that in spite of some level of protection for farmland by current land use policies, “population pressures are such that urban and farm coexistence will not be possible in the future without some changes in land use planning and urban/farm interface policies.”

Ralph Gross, President of the American Farmland Trust, said in *American Farmland* (Fall, 1995):

"Sprawl development is inefficient, costly, and squanders important and irreplaceable agricultural resources.... America's sprawling suburban building patterns threaten to decimate agriculture and saddle residents with enormous new tax bills.

...Policy makers must begin to consider the impact of sprawl and establish new zoning patterns and building densities that recognize and protect the important agricultural and resource lands.

If our decision-makers were really going to preserve agriculture and open space, they would have found a way to do so more consistently by now—so we wouldn't be losing so much so fast, and so that farmers/ranchers could be fairly compensated for agreeing to NOT "develop" their land. This could be accomplished through the public purchase of conservation easements. But since decision-makers haven't preserved enough and we are losing too many precious resources, citizens have rightly felt compelled to take the issue into their own hands. Hence, the push for local initiatives to require voter approval for any projects that would wipe out farmland or open space.

Hooray for Ventura, Thousand Oaks, and Napa Valley for their successful local initiative efforts at agricultural and open space preservation. I challenge the rest of us to do the same. Take the Napa Valley initiative which was upheld by the State Supreme Court and use it as a model for a county wide initiative and for similar initiatives in every other city in Ventura County. Or, if our local elected officials want to be proactive, then create a planning ordinance yourselves and place it on the ballot—to allow the public to decide on whether or not to forever convert lands zoned agriculture/open space to urban uses.

An informed citizenry and informed public officials have an obligation to future generations to preserve our natural resources (air, land, water) from over-development. Ventura County's "Guidelines for Orderly Development" are misnamed. They should be the "Guidelines for Orderly Planning." While the guidelines have been very helpful in stemming too much development over the last 20+ years or so, it's time to revisit their intent and give equal weight to the preservation of agricultural and open space lands as is given to "development."

The average person in Ventura County would say that it's just as important to have permanent public open space and agricultural lands as it is to have permanent residential, commercial, and industrial development. It's time we realized that all the land, air, and water in our county should not be subject to "urban development." Some of it is meant to be preserved FROM "development." If we don't start identifying what we will preserve—and formally doing it—there will be nothing left to preserve.

Roseann Mikos, Ph.D. lives in Moorpark.