



April 7, 2010

Steve Piasecki, Community Development Director
Community Development Department
City of Morgan Hill
17555 Peak Avenue
Morgan Hill, CA 95037

Re: Southeast Quadrant (SEQ) Project

Mr. Piasecki,

Thank you for informing Greenbelt Alliance about this evening's City Council hearing on a refined project description for the Southeast Quadrant and the consultant's findings regarding agricultural viability. Greenbelt Alliance has been following Morgan Hill's Urban Limit Line and Southeast Quadrant process for over six years.

Agricultural Viability

According to the California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, a considerable amount of land in the Southeast Quadrant is classified as Prime Farmland. Prime Farmland has the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term agricultural production. Additionally, urban edge farming and community gardens are making a comeback in Santa Clara County. This indicates that it is premature to view all farmland near urban areas as having a short lifespan.

Last October, Greenbelt Alliance submitted a question that we suggested should frame the Agricultural Policies Study:

What would it take to make small scale agriculture viable in Morgan Hill?

Greenbelt Alliance was very pleased to learn that House Agriculture found small-scale farming to be viable in Morgan Hill. It is critical therefore that a revised project description reflect this finding. However, it is disappointing that despite farmland's viability, the proposed mitigation program suggests that fees should be phased, with no fee for projects moving forward in 2010. This is unfortunate and questionable, especially considering there are six project applications that have been folded within the project description. Greenbelt Alliance also disagrees that low intensity recreational uses should be allowed on preserved lands. This would be inconsistent with LAFCO's adopted Agricultural Mitigation Policies.

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Since small scale farming has been determined to be viable, any farmland that is converted to other uses must be mitigated. Morgan Hill was historically an agricultural center, and most of that land was developed without mitigation. Now that Morgan Hill is taking the loss of farmland seriously, there must be a mitigation program that reflects the value of this land. Greenbelt Alliance encourages the City of Morgan Hill to pursue a stronger agricultural mitigation policy.

Last fall, Greenbelt Alliance won our court case against the City of Oakley over their failure to protect farmland. Superior Court Judge Barry Baskin stated in his ruling that, “Inexplicably, the City failed to consider a reasonable range of mitigation measures or potentially feasible alternatives to lessen the impact to important farmland.” Morgan Hill is to be commended for hiring an agricultural consultant to study this issue in detail. However, many of the mitigation recommendations being considered by the City would qualify as failing to protect farmland. The piecemeal development of farmland throughout California is adding up. Cities cannot pave working farms without compensating for that loss.

City-centered growth

In a time of budget deficits and stretched city services, it makes very little sense to annex more land into city limits that would need to receive services. Greenbelt Alliance has long advocated that Morgan Hill has a rare opportunity to have a protected greenbelt, something lost long ago to cities from San Jose north to San Francisco. New development closer to the center of town is a more efficient use of land, services, infrastructure and money.

Even though Morgan Hill is initiating Urban Growth Boundary and Urban Service Area amendments, the Local Agency Formation Commission has ultimate authority over annexations. LAFCO was established to prevent sprawl, protect farmland and promote orderly growth. Morgan Hill’s Southeast Quadrant project runs contrary to these goals. An Industrial Land Market Study clearly stated that there is plenty of vacant and underutilized land within city limits to accommodate future growth. The Morgan Hill City Council must carefully consider whether it is prudent to annex more land that will require city services when the City is struggling to meet the needs of current residents.

Morgan Hill General Plan

Annexation and development of the Southeast Quadrant will affect the entire community of Morgan Hill, yet until very recently, it has mainly been SEQ landowners who have been actively engaged in the planning process. When these findings were initially revealed at the recent community workshop, the majority of speakers in the audience voiced support for local farmland and questioned the need to open this land up for development.

Clearly the City needs to take a step back and initiate an update of the General Plan to assess whether or not this is the right direction for Morgan Hill. There is no need to rush this process of annexation and development. The Urban Limit Line/ Greenbelt Committee that wrapped up its work in 2005 was created to establish a permanent greenbelt around the entire community; not to find suitable uses for the SEQ. And a majority of residents have repeatedly voted for greenbelt policies, so the City Council is obligated to make sure the community as a whole is on board with the SEQ project.

Time for Re-Evaluation

Annexation and development of the Southeast Quadrant runs counter to established policies and community will. This land is not needed for development and it is questionable whether Morgan Hill can afford to provide services to a more spread out community. The City is putting attention and money to land outside its Urban Growth Boundary, when it is the libraries, roads, parks and police within city limits that need the Council's attention. And farming is far from dead as evidenced by thriving Full Circle Farm in Sunnyvale and Veggielution in the heart of San Jose.

Greenbelt Alliance hopes that these issues are given their due consideration in the Environmental Impact Report. Morgan Hill can have the best of both worlds- a vibrant, walkable downtown and a fully protected greenbelt. It takes visionary and bold leadership to ensure this happens. Morgan Hill's City Council can continue to be good stewards of the land and take a firm position to hold the line and protect the City's greenbelt.

We look forward to following this process. Please continue to keep us informed of all meetings, especially as it relates to the Notice of Preparation and Public Scoping period.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michele Beasley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michele Beasley
Senior Field Representative

CC: Morgan Hill City Council
LAFCO
Bill Shoe, Santa Clara County Planning
Brian Schmidt, Committee for Green Foothills