

# Tierra Rejada Valley greenbelt matters

The natural open space and farmlands between our cities are a source of incalculable value to our county. They safeguard wildlife habitat, clean water and a healthy local food supply. They underpin a resilient economy and provide us with breathing room, recreation and a connection to the land. They surround and make livable our communities and define our sense of place.

Our greenbelts enjoy several layers of protection, including the Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources initiatives, greenbelt agreements, and the county general plan's Guidelines for Orderly Development. But none of these lands is permanently safe from the threat of development. If not renewed, the SOAR boundaries will begin expiring in 2020. The seven greenbelt agreements around the county are voluntary "handshake" commitments between cities and the county that lack teeth for enforcement. Even publicly owned parklands may be put up for sale to meet near-term budget crises.

When we start chipping away at the greenbelts through piecemeal annexation, ranchette development and other forms of urban or rural sprawl, we reduce their ability to provide the things we value, and we take a step toward losing them altogether.

The Tierra Rejada greenbelt between Thousand Oaks, Moorpark and Simi Valley is the last remaining open space that keeps these three cities from sprawling together into a single urban/suburban mass. It is part of a critical wildlife corridor, one of the last remaining links between the coastal Santa Monica Mountains to the south and inland ranges to the north. And it is home to family farms that bring fresh, locally grown foods to our markets and tables.

Ventura County residents understand the unique and irreplaceable value of places like the Tierra Rejada Valley. They expect that any decision to compromise a greenbelt, here or elsewhere, should be taken only after the community has engaged in serious, thoughtful and informed deliberation. Voters here have underscored again and again that such irreversible steps toward development should be taken only when compelling need and community benefits have been clearly demonstrated, and all reasonable alternatives have been exhausted.

The city of Simi Valley is asking its neighboring cities to join it in amending the Tierra Rejada greenbelt agreement to allow the city to annex nearly 230 acres of the greenbelt, including 67 acres of undeveloped open space, along with the Reagan Library complex and seven 10-acre residential lots.

According to state law, the express purpose of annexation by cities is for development. Claims that annexation will strengthen the open-space protections do not equate to credible guarantees that the greenbelt will, in fact, remain open and protected.

In addition to moving these lands a step closer to development, this action would also set a precedent that could lead to further weakening of the greenbelt agreements. When one city takes a bite out of a greenbelt, it paves the way — literally or figuratively — for others to follow suit.

Our society faces enormous environmental challenges. In this era of climate change and rapidly constricting land and water resources, we should rejoice in the rich open space and agricultural lands our county has held onto against all odds, and take steps to strengthen their protection, not allow them to erode away.

The county of Ventura has taken such steps recently by enacting a moratorium on developing lands zoned open space in the unincorporated county, and initiating a first-of-its-kind wildlife corridor zoning to keep development away from the few wildlife corridors that connect the Santa Monica Mountains to the Simi Hills and Los Padres Forest. The county should continue pursuing these and other regulatory measures to strengthen greenbelt protections. The cities, in turn, should focus on smart growth within their existing footprints, rather than opening the door to more sprawl.

Perhaps the most important value of our greenbelts is the ability to pass them on to future generations. Squandering this legacy — whether in small bites or big ones — is unconscionable.