



ECOS

ENVIRONMENTAL
♦ COUNCIL ♦
OF SACRAMENTO

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May 22, 2009

Laura S Gill
City Manager, Elk Grove City
8380 Laguna Palms Way, Suite 200
Elk Grove, CA 95758

Terry Schutten
County Executive, Sacramento County
700 H Street, Room 7650
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Ms. Gill and Mr. Schutten:

SUBJECT: ELK GROVE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Habitat 2020 and the Environmental Council of Sacramento (ECOS) have prepared this letter and join with other concerned community groups as signees in order to highlight the many issues raised by the proposed Elk Grove Sphere of Influence (SOI) expansion. We are aware that Elk Grove and Sacramento County have been engaged in a “behind the scenes” conversation. We are somewhat uncomfortable that this dialogue has not been an open conversation with the community. We hope this letter will inform your dialogue and help focus issues where public dialogue is needed.

A Major Issue. The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors adopted the 1993 Urban Services Boundary (USB) as a carefully crafted planning tool to provide for decades of growth within its limit while protecting viable expanses of habitat, rangeland, and farmland beyond. The USB is an important planning tool, and as such requires a supermajority of County Board members to change it. With the exception of the 500-acre Greenbriar project, all local jurisdictions have honored the USB. Sacramento voters have overwhelmingly defeated a privately-backed initiative to amend the County General Plan to expand the USB to include Deer Creek Hills.

Thus, Elk Grove’s request to expand its Sphere of Influence by 10,000 acres beyond the USB--with the clear intention of annexation and future urban development--is a radical departure from the balancing of urban and open space uses accomplished by the Board of Supervisors in 1993. Elk Grove’s request is therefore the preminent development issue facing the region.

Basis for Concern. The undersigned organizations OPPOSE the proposed expansion of Elk Grove’s SOI and the annexation and urban development intended for the proposed SOI area for the following reasons:

- Elk Grove does not need the SOI area for its new development. There are over 8,000 undeveloped acres within the Elk Grove city limit which are suitable for urban

development. There are many more thousands of acres of undeveloped land within the Urban Service Boundary to the northeast of Elk Grove that can accommodate regional growth needs.

- Approval of an SOI by the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) would trigger runaway real estate speculation within the SOI and probably throughout southern Sacramento County, which would escalate the cost of acquiring conservation easements to mitigate for development within the USB. A recent example is the "Joint Vision for Natomas MOU" by Sacramento City and County in December, 2002, which triggered a wave of speculation throughout the Natomas Basin that greatly increased developers' mitigation costs and motivated Natomas landowners to cease farming in the belief that cessation of farming would expedite urban development entitlements.
- Loss of 8,000 - 10,000 acres of farmland due to the SOI and subsequent annexation and urban development may reduce remaining South County farmland below the "critical mass" needed to support the financial and physical infrastructure required for commercially-viable agriculture in South County.
- Adoption of the SOI and subsequent approval of 8,000 - 10,000 acres of urban development may jeopardize the physical, biological, and financial feasibility of the South Sacramento County Habitat Conservation Plan (SSCHCP), thus posing a barrier to its lawful approval by US Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game. Diversion of surface water for the Zone 40 Water Supply Master Plan, via the Freeport diversion facility, is contingent upon approval of the SSCHCP by the Federal and State wildlife agencies. The conservation strategy of the draft SSCHCP process assumes no urban development south of the USB and relies on the assumption that most land outside the USB will remain in agriculture and continue to provide habitat benefits to covered species. The SOI and subsequent annexation and development would: (1) reduce the area available for acquisition of SSCHCP conservation easements; (2) increase by up to 10,000 acres the area of habitat destruction which the SSCHCP would be expected to mitigate; and, (3) drive up the cost of acquiring conservation easements.
- Development within the SOI would expand the urban footprint around the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and increase the adverse impacts from urban runoff and human activity on an important migratory and nesting stop on the Pacific Flyway.
- The SOI area is critical nesting and foraging habitat for a significant number of nesting pairs of Swainson's Hawks.
- The proposed 10,000-acre SOI area is outside the Preferred Alternative Scenario and therefore is inconsistent with the Sacramento Area Council of Government's (SACOG) Blueprint. Approval of the SOI will discredit the award-winning SACOG Blueprint, thereby jeopardizing local government's ability to obtain funding and permits which rely on Blueprint's perceived commitment that local government will limit urban development to land within the Blueprint Preferred Alternative Map.

- There is no surface water supply for development within the SOI area outside of the USB. Current surface water contracts are restricted to use within the current USB. Thousands more acres of urban development reliant on groundwater would accelerate existing groundwater overdraft and further deplete the Cosumnes River, thereby jeopardizing the Cosumnes salmon and steelhead runs, and possibly reducing groundwater to less than what is needed to support riparian forests and habitat of the Cosumnes River corridor and its tributaries.

An Open City and County Dialogue. The above significant issues notwithstanding, Elk Grove and the County have begun a series of meetings to develop a “collaborative vision . . . of the conservation principles for the Cosumnes River corridor and lands south of Elk Grove in the context of the City’s proposed SOI amendment.” At a public meeting on March 18, 2009, there was strong community sentiment in support of an open and transparent discussion process. The undersigned organizations strongly support this approach. In addition to the four planned public outreach meetings, we recommend that all meetings between staff to develop your “collaborative vision” be announced public meetings. Interested parties should be able to observe the discussion and have an opportunity to make short comments at the end of the meeting.

Moreover, we believe that the dialogue between Elk Grove and the County needs to reflect the significance of the City’s request. Already under discussion are floodplain protection and ensuring the adoption of a viable SSCHCP. But much more should be on the table.

Four Important Prerequisites. The dialogue between the City and County must recognize that there need to be at least four necessary prerequisites to expanding Elk Grove’s urban footprint:

- 1) An independent determination that additional land area is essential to accommodate urban growth assigned to the City of Elk Grove by SACOG.
- 2) An independent determination that that the City has achieved a demonstrable record of responsible, higher intensity, smart growth within its existing boundary and has aggressively pursued economic development opportunities and initiatives within its existing land base.
- 3) The establishment of a functioning and financed special district to protect habitat, sustain agriculture and provide rural recreational amenities; and,
- 4) Final adoption of the SSCHCP.

Scope of Dialogue. The scope of your discussion should therefore include:

- Contractual agreements that must be in place for a new source of surface water.
- Contractual agreements that will be necessary to ensure storm water and wastewater treatment facilities are adequate to accommodate the urban growth within the SOI without creating environmental hazards.

- Metrics that would demonstrate significant progress by the City in increasing infill density, expanding economic development, and implementing Smart Growth principles inside existing city limits.
- A build-out threshold that would ensure that annexation does not occur prior to the need to accommodate projected population growth.
- Agreed-upon parameters to implement tax base revenue sharing between City and County that covers new office, industrial and big box commercial development both within the City and within the portions of the unincorporated area around Elk Grove.
- A strategy to deal effectively with global warming and the impacts associated with a projected one meter increase in sea level and increased flooding due to warmer winter storms.
- Guarantees that the 100-year flood plain of Deer Creek/Cosumnes River will not be reduced and that natural stream conditions will be maintained in perpetuity.
- Assurances that, 1) the land protected through the SSCHCP will be qualitatively comparable to that which would be lost through development within the expanded SOI, as well as assurances that, 2) the SSCHCP will be economically viable in terms of land costs determined by the reduced availability of habitat for preservation in relation to the new demand created by development.
- Guarantees of a substantial buffer from urban uses around the legislated boundary of the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), all current wildlife preserves and a permanent greenbelt between the Cities of Elk Grove and Galt.
- Identification of a source of funding from the City of Elk Grove to provide a local match with state and federal funds to purchase land from willing sellers within the Stone Lakes NWR legislated boundary.
- Parameters of an agreement to create a regional park and trail system in the South County.
- Parameters of an agreement to put a ballot measure before Sacramento voters that would create a regional open space district dedicated to permanent preservation of habitat, agricultural and recreational lands.

The environmental community has registered strong opposition to Elk Grove's request and remains unconvinced that expansion is warranted. However, as long as Sacramento County and Elk Grove City are negotiating an understanding on an SOI prefatory to the Local Agency Formation Commission approval process, the citizens of Sacramento County and the community organizations that represent the public interest must demand that you consider the strongest and most effective measures to ensure that the final outcome is significantly better than the status quo.

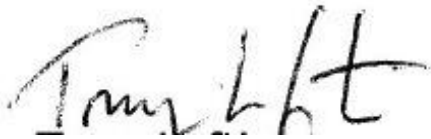
Sincerely,



Alex Kelter, President
Environmental Council of Sacramento



Rob Burness, Chair
Habitat 2020



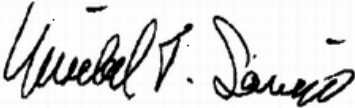
Tony Loftin, Chair
Sacramento Group Mother Lode Chapter Sierra Club

//////Signed//////


Keith Wagner, President, Board of Directors
Sacramento Audubon Society



Warren Truitt, President
Save the American River Association



President,
Save Our Sandhill Cranes



Jennifer Stock, Board President
California Native Plant Society, Sacramento Chapter



Alta Tura, President
Sacramento Area Creeks Council



Liz Zainasheff, President

Stone Lakes NWR Association



Tammy Walls, on behalf of Board of Directors
Sacramento Natural Foods Coop



Shamus Roller, Executive Director
Sacramento Housing Alliance



Harry Wang, MD, President
Sacramento Physicians for Social Responsibility

cc: City Council Members

Board of Supervisor Members

Pat Blacklock, Assistant City Manager, Elk Gove

Don Hazen Planning Director, Elk Gove

Robert Sherry, Planning Director, Sacramento County

Peter Brundage, Executive Officer, Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission

Mike McKeever, Executive Director, Sacramento Area Council of Governments

Bill Kutzer, Wilton Action Group