



Houses on bluff above row crops and orchards in Hollister.

SBALT NEWS

Cultivating our future: Searching for the balance between housing and agriculture

By Lynn Overtree

Food and Shelter. These are basics we need to survive. The challenge is optimizing our land use

so that achieving one does not compromise the other. At SBALT we work for the protection of irreplaceable soils that support productive agricultural crops and businesses. Our two population centers, Hollister and San Juan Bautista, are expanding onto the very lands that attracted historical settlements because of their optimal farming conditions.

The State of California is requiring San Benito County to plan for 5,000 additional housing units over the next eight years. New housing developments are appearing at multiple locations. We commend those who encourage growth to occur within the cities' developed areas ("in-fill") because farmland is not lost. For projects that do pave over rich agricultural soils, the County and cities request that the developer pay to permanently preserve an equal acreage of productive farmland. This is called "mitigation," and the recommended ratio in San Benito County's General Plan is 1:1.

One-to-one mitigation still results in the

San Benito Agricultural



net loss of half of our farmland. For example, if ten acres are converted to housing and another ten acres are permanently pre-

served, then only ten of the original twenty acres remains farmland. Alternatively, 2:1 mitigation accepts a loss of a third of the farmland. At least four other jurisdictions in California (two counties, two cities) have or are considering policies that require 2:1 mitigation for farmland converted to other uses.

I recently met some wonderful people who moved to a new housing development in Hollister from Sunnyvale because of the rural beauty we still enjoy. They questioned the policies for new developments because it compromises the values that attracted them here in the first place. I encouraged them to become civically engaged. We all have a role in determining how we grow.

This New Year we hope you will make a resolution to engage in your community. Watch for BenitoLink's weekly notice of public meetings. Attend and share YOUR vision for cultivating San Benito County's future. Learn more about your local land trust at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■