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Supervisors approve developing strategic initiative for agriculture

By Daily Republic Staff
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A tractor tills soil in the Suisun Valley in Fairfield, Tuesday, May 9, 2023. Solano County Supervisor Mitch Mashburn said it is okay to portray farmers and ranchers in a sympathetic image of providers of food, clothing and other goods. (Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic)

FAIRFIELD — Solano County Supervisor Mitch Mashburn said it is OK to portray farmers and ranchers in a sympathetic image of providers of food, clothing and other goods.

However, he said that is not enough when making what amounts to business decisions.

“We often lose sight that ag is an industry. It is the second-largest economy-driving industry in our county,” Mashburn said. An estimate of that economic impact is \$1.6 billion.

Mashburn said what is needed to protect and grow that industry is hard data of what exists and what is needed, especially with technology changing that industry at an accelerated pace.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, with Supervisor Erin Hannigan absent, authorized Agriculture Commission Ed King to apply for a Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation planning grant of up to \$500,000 to develop a countywide strategic initiative for agriculture.

Suggested components of a strategic initiative include:

- Creation of a map-based platform to help stakeholders and decision-makers evaluate and protect agricultural lands.
- A policy refresh targeting updates to the General Plan; encouraging establishment of infrastructure that facilitates growth of the agricultural economy; strengthening land use policies and ordinances; and evaluating how the county's Williamson Act uniform rules and procedures can protect lands most vulnerable to conversion to other uses.
- Developing an Agricultural Economic Development Program that ensures investment in a secure future for the county's agricultural economy. Giving local producers more influence is key.
- Facilitating a climate resilient future for local agriculture by supporting regenerative farming and ranching practices that meet the economic, environmental and social needs of the county.
- Starting an outreach and engagement initiative to build support for and catalyze co-stewardship of local agriculture.

The board action followed a presentation of an ad hoc committee report, presented by King as well as representatives of Ag Innovations, which was paid \$93,000 to complete an agriculture assessment.

The ad hoc committee, which includes Mashburn and board Chairman John Vasquez, will now help develop the pre-application draft.

The primary focus will be on land use and economic development.

Also on the committee are King; County Administrator Bill Emlen; Terry Schmidtbauer, director of Resource Management; Rich Seithel, executive director of the Local Agency Formation Commission; Misty Kaltreider, Water and Natural Resources manager for the county; Nancy Nelson, a senior analyst in the Administrator's Office; and Morgan Doran with the UC Cooperative Extension.

The ad hoc committee started its work in November 2021. Ag Innovations was brought on board soon after. Their group also has helped with the development of the groundwater sustainability plan, as well as the Cache Slough Land Evaluation and Assessment and the ongoing Putah Creek Water Management Project.

It would appear Ag Innovations is the frontrunner to be contracted to continue the ag industry work.

Supervisor Wanda Williams wanted to expand the committee for the next step, with a representative appointed by each board member. Her motion failed to get support.

However, Vasquez acknowledged that once the draft application work is completed, the committee Williams' envisions may be needed.

Williams, in general, did not think there were enough "voices" in developing the assessment, and was particularly upset that the Agriculture Advisory Committee, which was dissolved last week, was not more fully utilized even though the ad hoc assessment mentions the possible restructuring of the committee for the work.

She also believed that small farmers were not adequately represented, a position with which Pleasants Valley Agriculture Association members agreed.

They said they were ignored entirely, and could have provided valuable insight into the ag industry's future, especially when it came to small farming operations and direct product sales.

What the committee did do was interview 40 individuals representing 47 ag interests. That included at least 20 farmers, the board was told.

But it also included ag processors, academic advisers and researchers, a farmworker group, land conservation advocates, air and water agency representatives, two resource conservation districts and county staff. Through that group, all commodity groups in the county were represented, the report to the board states.

There were three objectives the committee started with: access the current state of agriculture; understand how the industry has changed in recent years; and develop recommendations on how to “ensure the long-term viability and success of Solano agriculture, including potential changes to the General Plan.”

“For ag to be sustainable, you have to protect (it) ... and it has to be profitable,” Vasquez said.

What the county has going for it is its diversity in crops, its diversity in farming industries, its geography and the diversity in land types as well as its location close to transportation routes and markets.

It needs more processors, and it needs to protect what it has. Vasquez noted that as Dixon expands east, it puts pressure on Superior Farms and the Campbell Soup facility – likening growth closing in on an airport.

The board was told only a small percentage of goods produced in Solano County go to Solano consumers, and a high percentage of foods consumed locally come from outside the county. That has to change, the board was told, and educating the public will be a big part of that.

Sustainable Solano wants to be a bridge between the ag industry and the public, and the Solano Land Trust offered its experience with SALC grants to help the county to get the planning funds.