

Independent, Thurs. July 21, 2011

Landowners Give More Feedback on Williamson Act Policy

The Alameda County Planning Commission spent two hours hearing from the public about proposed changes in the county policy on the Williamson Act. The commission did not reach a decision, but continued the matter to Sept. 6.

The commission met July 18 at the county building in Hayward. Issues raised by audience members centered on definitions of terms in the draft, with questions and suggestions concerning them.

In general, the questions about definitions centered on landowners' desire that the county be less restrictive so that landowners would find it easier to sign a contract.

More public notice about the meetings was encouraged by several audience members. One said that he had heard about the meeting only that day. He owns land in the Williamson Act, but never received a notice.

He asked whether the county notified all Williamson Act con-

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tract signers, and was told the staff had not done that. However, the staff did put the word out through the county agricultural advisory committee, Supervisor Nate Miley's 4th District Agricultural Committee, and Supervisor Scott Haggerty's Rural Roads Committee, said staff.

For example, the state has certain requirements about owner occupancy of a house on the land. The county is limited in what it can change to add a degree of flexibility for landowners.

Landowners have questioned the idea that only a family would be allowed to occupy the dwelling on a ranch or farm. The county rewrote its policy draft in May to add that caretakers or agricultural employees could also live in a residence on the land. The key thing is that they have some connection to the agricultural activity on the property.

It was pointed out at the meeting that security is included, which might just involve turning on the lights on the property. It would broaden the number of people eligible to live in the residence.

The county's draft expands the definition of immediate family to include siblings and domestic

partners.

There were also references in the draft to solar panels. The agricultural advisory committee discussed that point. The committee determined that the county's current policy, of allowing 10 acres of solar panels, or 10 percent of the total land, whichever is smaller, should be adequate to meet the needs of a rancher or farmer on the parcel. It could even provide enough electricity for a fairly large winery.

Since the Williamson Act is dedicated to agricultural preservation, the intention is not to start a solar industry on the land.

Also on the subject, it's possible for a landowner who wants to start a solar installation commercially to opt out of the Williamson Act to do so.

Staff mentioned there is a bill in the State Legislature to convert wind turbine land to solar power. The county is monitoring that bill.