

Brentwood yanks funds from conservation group

• **Officials say trust that protects farmland and agriculture in East County should be self-sufficient**

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The future of East County's agricultural land conservation group is in doubt after Brentwood city leaders decided to strip city funds from the organization.

"Everyone is sort of still in shock because it was such an abrupt action by the city council," said Mike Strle, a board member of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust. "Contrary to what they stated last evening, there was no correspondence to us threatening us or expressing displeasure about what we were doing or not doing."

The City Council on Tuesday voted unanimously to terminate administrative funding for BALT, a nonprofit organization that works to protect farmland and promote agriculture in East County. Councilman Brandon Richey was absent for the vote.

BALT board members said they will call a meeting soon to discuss the future of the organization. The city's funding will end June 30.

Farmers and agricultural advocates on Tuesday pleaded for the council to keep BALT funding in tact, saying that this financial cut will be a setback to the struggling agricultural community that has relied on the organization to help protect farmland in East County.

They pointed out that BALT has not only worked to conserve land, but it has brought in thousands of dollars in grant money to draft a comprehensive regional marketing program and create the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local," campaign, all of which has helped put Brentwood's agriculture on the map.

"The agricultural community has lost a major resource," said Kathryn Lyddan, executive director of BALT. "We are not in a position to sustain the organization right now without city funding."

The city has spent roughly \$600,000 since 2002 to cover administrative expenses for BALT, including funding two staff members.

But council members said that BALT has not been money well spent. Instead, the funds should be invested in other ag-related projects, such as co-ops closer to Brentwood, council members said.

"I'm concerned if we don't put a stop to it now, the administration of BALT will get bigger and bigger," said Councilman Chris Becnel. "I think we've made a fairly convincing case that the administrative portion is not working."

The city created BALT four years ago, with the mission to secure land conservation easements in the region using money from the city's agricultural enterprise fund. Easements are meant to protect agricultural land from future development.

Since then, BALT has spent roughly \$305,000 to buy one easement, according to city officials. However, BALT leaders said they are in the process of signing agreements with other landowners for additional easements.

Earlier this year, the council formed a committee to review how the city was spending its agricultural enterprise funds, which included BALT expenses. Vice Mayor Bob Brockman and Councilman Erick Stonebarger were appointed to the committee.

The committee on Tuesday recommended the council stop administrative funding for BALT, saying the organization should be self-sufficient.

However, city leaders said they will continue to purchase conservation easements that are brought forward to the council.

"We had zero desire to not support ag in this area to the best of our ability," Stonebarger said. "(We want) to protect those funds and use them for agriculture and not on a lot of administrative expenses."

But local farmers told the council that the best way to revive agriculture in East County is to invest in organizations such as BALT.

"We are missing the boat on the amazing resources we have here," said Al Courchesne, a Brentwood fruit farmer. "We could realize a big return on a small investment in this community."

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