

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Farm Report: Keeping our farmland for farming

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Brentwood farmers have been growing healthy, local food for the Bay Area since the Gold Rush.

With rich Delta soils, ample water and year-round growing season, East Contra Costa County is an ideal region for growing food. Local farms provide our communities with extraordinary fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as green jobs, open space and a sense of our history, place and seasons.

However, some qualities that make the Brentwood region perfect for growing food also make it attractive for suburban development.

Brentwood is close to cities and jobs, the land is flat and easy to build on, and the weather is beautiful.

During the past 20 years, the population of Brentwood has grown from 7,500 people to 50,000

people. Most new homes built for the burgeoning population have been built on the farmland that has provided us with local food for generations.

Fortunately, East Contra Costa County still has 12,000 acres of prime, irrigated farmland. While Brentwood has become a bedroom community for the Bay Area, the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust has been working to preserve Contra Costa's farmland so that orchards, fields and vineyards continue to be an important part of our landscape.

The land trust protects farmland with conservation easements. Conservation easements are used around the nation to conserve open space and farmland.

A conservation easement is an agreement between the farmer and the land trust that the land never will be developed in the future.

When a conservation easement is recorded on farmland, the farmer continues to own and farm the land but promises that the land will not be subdivided or developed in the future.

The Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust purchases conservation easements from farmers. The conservation easements compensate farmers for the many benefits that their farms provide to our community, provide farmers with capital to invest in their farms and offer an economic alternative to selling farmland for development.

Dick and Maxine VrMeer nurtured their 23-acre organic apricot orchard south of Brentwood for decades. Maxine, a master gardener, planted a hedgerow of native plants around the farm's perimeter to provide habitat for beneficial insects.

When the VrMeers decided to retire from farming, they wanted to know that their farm would remain in farming for future generations. The Trust worked

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with the VrMeer's to create a conservation easement that protects both their farm and the wildlife hedgerow around the orchard.

Through the conservation easement, the VrMeers were able to sell their farm and retire, knowing that their farm will continue to be used as farmland forever.

Neil and Glenda Cohn of Hannah Nicole Vineyards also want to ensure that their 80 acres of vineyards would remain as farmland for future generations.

The Cohns also wanted to build East Contra Costa's first winery so that they would not have to ship their grapes out of the county to make their award-winning wines. The agricultural land trust recognizes that conserving farmland is just one step in building a sustainable future for agriculture in the Bay Area.

Farmers must be able to continue to make a living farming the land. The trust worked closely with the Cohns to structure a conservation easement that conserves their land but also allows them to develop a successful, vertically integrated viticulture operation.

Hannah Nicole Vineyards will open the first winery and tasting room in East Contra Costa this fall.

In December, the trust purchased a conservation easement on the largest parcel of privately held prime farmland in East County. It now holds conservation easements on five Brentwood farms, and anticipates protecting additional farmland this year.

Our communities will continue to grow as California's population increases. Our new neighbors will need a place to live. However, the prime farmland of East Contra Costa County is an

irreplaceable resource that we cannot afford to lose.

By protecting farmland with conservation easements and directing development to other lands, we can grow our population and still keep our farmers farming.

Kathryn Lyddan is executive director of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and Tom Powers is the chairman of the trust board of directors and a farmer in Alhambra Valley. Reach them at brentwoodagtrust@sbcglobal.net.

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