

# New rules may help farms blossom

By Erin Sherbert

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Give it six more months, and Meredith Nunn says she will have to shut down her Brentwood fruit farm after more than 20 years in operation.

The county's restrictions on agricultural land have crippled East County farmers such as Nunn, who says she is not making enough money to survive.

"There's no profit to be made. Why should I continue?" said Nunn, who grows peaches and nectarines on her 19-acre farm.

But Contra Costa County officials are working with the agricultural community to create new economic opportunities for local farmers to market and sell their products.

Officials have crafted an ordinance that would allow growers to operate larger roadside stands and farm markets as well as commercial kitchens where they can process their raw products, such as turning strawberries into jam.

Currently, farmers cannot operate stands larger than 400 square feet, nor can they sell anything other than the raw produce grown on their property.

Under the draft ordinance, farmers would be allowed to operate markets as large as 3,500 square feet. It would also allow farmers to sell nonagricultural products and produce grown outside East County.

"What we're pushing is to relax the requirements and allow a whole lot more to improve the economic viability of small farms," said Donna Allen, a planner with the county.

County planners met with farmers Thursday and presented details of the proposed ordinance. Some growers who attended the meeting said the new regulations would certainly put more money in the pockets of struggling farmers.

"It opens the doors of opportunity to someone who wants to increase in business and investment," said Ken Hagan, a Brentwood fruit grower and president of Harvest Time, a nonprofit group of growers working to market directly to the public. "I'm optimistic."

Others said the county needs to be more aggressive in expanding economic opportunities for the East County agricultural community by allowing for picnic areas and venues for weddings and other outdoor events.

The proposed ordinance will go before the county Planning Commission in March, with a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors by May, officials said.

For years, East County growers have pushed the county to ease restrictions on the 12,000-acre agricultural core and allow growers to operate wineries, farm markets, commercial kitchens and other money-making businesses.

The county last year lifted its prohibition on wineries in the agricultural core. Yet many growers say the slow-moving bureaucracy and high fees have hindered vintners from opening wineries in East County.

"We are so far behind," Nunn said. "I see all these other farming communities working together. Here in Brentwood, we have done nothing."

East County has some of the region's most viable agricultural land, contributing more than \$300 million to Contra Costa's economy annually, according to a 2005 report released by the Contra Costa County Agricultural Advisory Task Force.

But local farmers are struggling to survive economically, primarily due to the consolidation of the state's agricultural industry and the globalization of food production, according to the report.

From 1997 to 2000, the price of food grown by state farmers dropped 7 percent, while farmers' costs rose about 19 percent, according to the task force report.

Despite efforts to preserve agricultural land in East County, the number of farms dropped 25 percent from 2000 to 2005, according to the report.

But the new ordinance should help boost the agricultural economy in East County, said Kathryn Lyddan, executive director of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust, a nonprofit group working to protect and promote agricultural land in East County.

"It should allow farmers to get a lot bigger piece of that food dollar that we spend," Lyddan said.

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