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Agenda Item: ID16-369 (3-D)

Date: 3/31/16

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Supplemental Information Packet

Agenda Related Item(s) – ID16-369 (3-D)

Contents of Supplement: Letter from San Joaquin Valley Sustainable Agriculture Collaborative

Item(s)

RESOLUTION – To initiate an amendment to Fresno General Plan Policy RC-9-C pursuant to Fresno Municipal Code Section 15-5803-C

Supplemental Information:

Any agenda related public documents received and distributed to a majority of the City Council after the Agenda Packet is printed are included in Supplemental Packets. Supplemental Packets are produced as needed. The Supplemental Packet is available for public inspection in the City Clerk's Office, 2600 Fresno Street, during normal business hours (main location pursuant to the Brown Act, G.C. 54957.5(2)). In addition, Supplemental Packets are available for public review at the City Council meeting in the City Council Chambers, 2600 Fresno Street. Supplemental Packets are also available on-line on the City Clerk's website.

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SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY
SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE
COLLABORATIVE



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March 30, 2016

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Honorable Members of City Council
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CITY CLERK, FRESNO CA

Comments on Proposed Resolution to Amend Fresno General Plan Policy RC-9-c (Farmland Preservation Program) pursuant to Fresno Municipal Code Section 15-5803

Dear Members of Fresno City Council:

We are writing to express our concern regarding the proposed resolution to remove the Fresno General Plan Policy RC-9-c (Farmland Preservation Program) pursuant to Fresno Municipal Code Section 15-5803. The San Joaquin Valley Sustainable Agriculture Collaborative is a group of non-profit organizations who work to advance agricultural and environmental policy towards justice for communities bearing the burden of California's food system, with emphasis on those burdened by agricultural contamination. The Collaborative's member organizations are Californians for Pesticide Reform, The Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, Community Water Center, Cultiva La Salud, El Quinto Sol De America, Fresno Metro Ministry, and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

Protecting rural life and livelihood: Policy RC-9-c (Farmland Preservation Program) reads that when prime farmland, unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance is converted to urban uses outside city limits, the developer of the project must protect an equal amount of similar farmland elsewhere through permanent easement. This robust policy was authored and approved as a major step forward in maintaining integrity to the agricultural spirit of our region, supporting the life and livelihood of our rural communities, and attaining our state and regional

climate and air quality goals. Conversely, its removal would wreak unintended consequences on Fresno's ability to support a robust agricultural economy, the life of our countryside, and the health of our most impacted communities.

The San Joaquin Valley is home to our most productive agricultural counties as well as to the state's most severely impacted resident communities who bear the burden of disjointed agriculture and city planning. The legacy of incoherent planning for the placement of new development has left countless communities in a state of isolation and disinvestment. Disadvantaged communities across Fresno County are subject to high-level risk of exposure to harmful pesticides, ground water contamination, and lack of access to transit and affordable housing. On the other hand, sustainable land-use, encouragement of urban density and a support for transit-oriented development are all corollary benefits of a comprehensive and robust farmland preservation policy, as authored and approved in the Farmland Preservation Strategy in the 2035 Fresno General Plan. In order to cultivate environmental justice at the interface of agriculture and rural communities, we believe it is critical that our City uphold a principle of protection and preservation of our precious agricultural soils and farming businesses.

Protecting our farming heritage: Fresno County is home to over 4,000 small family farmers, who farm as their primary livelihood. In addition to being a top producer of commodity crops such as grapes, almonds, cotton, and tree fruit, over one quarter of our county's small-farmer population run small-scale diversified farm operations marketing over 100 varieties of produce. These farmers are a critical piece of our regional agriculture and are some of the few farmers in the San Joaquin Valley growing specialty produce for local consumption. A 2013 Rural Connections study reports that the total acreage of diversified vegetables in Fresno County nearly doubled over the course of ten years (from 1994-2004), and by 2012 Fresno County's production totaled more than 12,600 tons and was valued at 9.6 million dollars (Fresno County Crop Report, 1994-2004 and 2012).¹ In the USDA designated food desert of Fresno, these small farmers are critical to the health and wellbeing of our local communities. Their location in the vulnerable peri-urban periphery of the city is an evermore critical reason that the maintenance of a robust farmland preservation policy is needed to protect the health and longevity of the region's constituency.

Integrity to implementation: In addition to the regression of strategy, we are concerned about the impacts that such an amendment holds in compromising the City's future ability to hold integrity to the 2035 General Plan as authored. Not only would an amendment to the Farmland Preservation Policy represent potential unforeseen environmental impacts that have not yet been quantified or assessed in the Master EIR prepared according to the California Environmental Protection Act for adoption of the General Plan, but it could result in a compromise of the overall integrity of the General Plan implementation process into the future.

Article 49 of the Fresno City Municipal Code is to identify officials with designated responsibilities and, that, among those responsibilities, the City Council's powers and duties include consideration and adoption of amendment to the General Plan following a public hearing and recommended action by the Planning Commission. We urge that the intention of this Article remain clear, and that its misinterpretation does not compromise the long-term implementation of the Plan's most useful elements.

The negative impacts of the loss of farmland are well documented, and while our state attempts to curb the loss of critical arable soil through emerging programs and initiatives, we urge you, as elected officials in California's premier agricultural county, to give due consideration to the long-term impacts of this resolution. As a Collaborative of organizations who work to promote a robust and sustainable agriculture in the interest of environmental justice and the life of our Valley, we suggest that the City engage a broader set of stakeholders in assessing the potential outcomes of this proposal on our region's agriculture, air quality and climate change, and environmental justice.

Sincerely,

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San Joaquin Valley Sustainable Agriculture Collaborative

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