

[Farmland Conservation: The Important Lesson of Brentwood, California](#)

<http://civileats.com/2009/08/10/farmland-conservation-the-important-lesson-of-brentwood-california/>

August 10th, 2009
By Naomi Starkman



The road to [Frog Hollow Farm](#) in Brentwood travels northern California's Highway 4, a hot and dusty corridor that was once lined with jeweled fields of cherries, peaches and apricots. Roughly 50 miles east of San Francisco on the Sacramento River Delta, this agricultural region is well-known for its stone fruit and corn. As with most places in the U.S., the landscape here has vastly changed in the past 30 years. Where once farmland reigned, endless rows of strip malls, big box stores, and tracts homes have sprouted, all to support a population

explosion.

According to the [Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust](#) (BALT)—which preserves productive agricultural land through farmland conservation and promotes local farming through the [Community Alliance with Family Farmers' Buy Fresh Buy Local](#) regional marketing campaign—the region includes more than 12,000 acres of contiguous, prime, irrigated farmland. The California Department of Conservation (CDC) has ranked the soils in East County Costa (where Brentwood sits) as having the highest quality and yields per acre of farmland are among the highest in the state. With such incredible soil and yields, farmers produce agricultural products valued at more than \$100 million a year and contribute more than \$300 million to the county's annual economy.

But something happened in Brentwood that reflects a disturbing national trend: rapid urban development and new suburban communities sprawling out over prime farmland. In 2002, Brentwood was one of the fastest growing cities in California; the city's population grew from 7,500 in 1990 to over 50,000 in 2005. According to the CDC between 1984 and 2004, almost 20,000 acres of county agricultural land, including 9,100 acres of farmland, were converted to urban uses. Between 1997 and 2000, the county lost 4,381 acres of agriculture land and ranked fourth among counties in California in the loss to urban use.

BALT's Executive Director, Kathryn Lyddan, says Brentwood grew houses, not jobs, and failed to develop any significant industry. As the population moved in, they were willing to commute ever far distances to jobs outside of the city. "Brentwood is the poster child of what is not sustainable, both economically and socially," says Lyddan. "Without real political commitment, there is a lack of support to protect the very land which makes this region so special."

In 2002, in response to pressure from the environmental community, Brentwood adopted an agricultural mitigation program which requires developers who convert agricultural land to urban use to pay \$5,500 an acre into a fund to be used to conserve farmland. Brentwood has since collected over \$12 million of agricultural mitigation funds, which are

held and controlled by the city. BALT was created and funded out of the mitigation fund to implement the program and developed independent, pro-active land conservation, as well as a grant funded agricultural marketing program. In November 2005, Brentwood placed a developer-funded initiative on the ballot asking the voters to move the urban limit line to allow additional development on the valuable farmland to the east of Brentwood. The initiative, which was actively supported by city, was narrowly defeated by only 148 votes. Then, in 2007, Brentwood stopped funding BALT.

Now that the economy has been devastated by the sub-prime mortgage crisis, rising fuel prices and resulting economic downturn, home values in Brentwood have dropped by 50 percent. According to BALT, Brentwood has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the Bay Area. The only silver lining of the failing economy is the reduced development pressure, which, according to Lyddan, provides significant opportunities to preserve agricultural land and build momentum for agricultural preservation.

Lyddan's work supports farms like Frog Hollow, 133 organic acres of Eden in the middle of Brentwood's sprawl. Run by farmer Al Courchesne, and his wife and business partner, pastry chef Rebecca, the farm is a prime example of the importance of preserving land and connecting to community through food. Farmer Al, who planted his first peach orchard in 1976, now grows [25 varieties](#) of peaches, nectarines, apricots, cherries, pluots, table grapes, plums, pears, as well as olives. The farm has a 400-member weekly [CSA](#) and runs a wildly popular urban farm stand at the San Francisco Ferry Plaza Marketplace, where they sell their fruit, along side Rebecca's outstanding sweet and savory pastries, as well as a Frog Hollow line of preserves, chutneys and marmalades.

Lyddan points out that farms like Frog Hollow and [others](#) create the components of a local food system: an extraordinary producing area that's close to Bay Area populations and institutional purchasers seeking local food. What's missing, she says, is a source-identified distribution system which would tell the story of Brentwood farmers to consumers, especially as more urbanites search for local connections to their food. Doing so, says Lyddan, would provide Brentwood farmers with new markets that could offer economic advantages over wholesale markets, provide urban residents with fresh, healthy food, and reduce food miles and while keeping food dollars in the community.

BALT is working hard to create these connections, while continuing its efforts to preserve family farms and fertile soils. Without BALT, vital farmland in East Contra Costa will continue to disappear. You can support their important work by becoming a [member](#) and/or volunteering. In addition, join BALT for their fifth annual [harvest celebration](#) September 20 at Taylor Ranch.

Naomi Starkman is a food policy media consultant to Consumers Union and others. She served as the Director of Communications & Policy at Slow Food Nation '08 and has been a media consultant to The New Yorker, Condé Nast Portfolio, GQ and WIRED magazines. She was previously a senior publicist at Newsweek magazine and was the Director of Communications for the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). From 1997 to 2000, she served as Deputy Executive Director of the S.F. Ethics Commission. She is the co-founder of Civil Eats and [Kitchen Table Talks](#), a local food forum in San Francisco, and a board member of [18 Reasons](#), a nonprofit connecting community through food. Naomi works with various clients on food policy and advocacy and is an aspiring organic grower, having worked on several farms.

Tags: [BALT](#), [Brentwood](#), [development](#), [farmland preservation](#), [Frog Hollow Farm](#), [urbanization](#)