



City halts BALT bucks

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Citing the need to preserve the city's limited agricultural enterprise funds for land preservation, the City Council Tuesday voted to end administrative funding for the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust as of June 30.

Established in 2002 to help preserve farmland in and around Brentwood, BALT has since received about \$600,000 in administrative funding. In that time, BALT has secured easements for about 52 acres of farmland, according to BALT Executive Director Kathryn Lyddan.

"I knew the city felt we weren't performing on the easements," Lyddan said. "But it takes an enormous amount of time to get these Ag preservation programs off the ground." A similar trust in Marin County, she said, took more than four years to acquire its first easement, and has now protected 38,000 acres.

Part of the problem is that the easements, which prevent residential and commercial development of farmland while allowing farmers to retain ownership, are a harder sell if there's a chance the land could be sold to a developer for a much higher value. Recent uncertainty over the Urban Limit Line – re-established by voters last year – limited the number of owners willing to sell easements on property that might be worth a lot more in the future.

BALT has also done more than just secure 52 acres, Lyddan said. It helped the Contra Costa Wine and Grape Growers Association get established, launched a Buy Fresh/Buy Local campaign to enhance the value and salability of local crops, and developed a comprehensive Agricultural Marketing Plan. It has also received \$220,000 in grant funding for some of its programs, and raised an additional \$50,000 through fundraising dinners.

But although BALT's mission included a marketing component, those additional achievements were not part of BALT's primary job of purchasing easements, according to Councilman Chris Becnel. He called them "mission creep," and expressed concern that the trend could result in "the city funding things we didn't necessarily contemplate" when the original funding was put in place.

The council voted 4-0 to end the administrative funding (Councilman Brandon Richey was absent) as recommended by its Agricultural Subcommittee, comprised of Councilmen Bob Brockman and Erick Stonebarger. Brockman said that although the committee was recommending the June 30 date, he wanted the full council to consider BALT's request for three more months' operating capital to allow time to try to secure money elsewhere.

Numerous speakers were on hand to ask for continuation of the funding, even if for only the three-month transition period. Some praised the work BALT had done, and said they were in negotiations with BALT to sell easements on their land.

Brockman, however, said that BALT has had "things in the works for a very long time," many of which seemed more imminent every time a funding cycle came around.

Farmer Al Courchesne was among those seeking a continuation of BALT's funding. He began by complimenting the council on the new, \$108 million Civic Center plan adopted earlier in the meeting, then said the BALT funding was "paltry" compared to that and to the potential benefits of preserving agriculture.

The 15,000 acres of active farmland in the area is capable of producing three billion pounds of food per year, he said, enough to feed three million people. Furthermore, the prime Ag lands were perfect for a Napa-style economy, yielding a huge return for the small amount of money invested.

BALT Secretary Mike Stirle decried the accuracy of the city staff report on the item. He acknowledged that the fledgling preservation program had some "challenges," but said BALT's recommendations to address them had never "been considered or even commented on." According to Stirle, the city had never provided performance benchmarks, nor had BALT been told that money might be abruptly cut off.

Brockman objected to the term "abrupt," saying that the possibility had been discussed on several occasions. Most recently, he said, the Ag subcommittee had encouraged BALT members to apply for future funding, and promised to make a quick decision to enable BALT at least some time before the June 30 expiration of the current round. The application for continued funding was due on March 10, however, and

had not been received by the city, according to Finance Director Pam Ehler.

Stonebarger pointed out that the cessation of funding did not mean the end of BALT, as the trust was an independent organization that could seek money elsewhere for operations. In fact, he said, the move meant that others could now bring easements forward directly to the City of Brentwood, which could administer them more economically.

The city's Ag preservation fund comes from mitigation fees paid to the city of Brentwood by developers. About \$10 million has been collected, and about \$10 million more could come from future projects. About \$1 million of the administrative portion of those funds remains, which would amount to less than three years' funding for BALT at the current pace of spending. The council felt the price was too high.

The council's job, Stonebarger said prior to the vote, was to perform "to the best of our ability to protect those funds and to use them for the (easement) program."

Lyddan said Wednesday that BALT's future was now uncertain. Most of the money raised had been earmarked for specific projects, and could not be used for administration.

"It's a real shock to have no transitional funds," she said. "The board will regroup and take a look at things. It's very difficult to get grants for operations, and we're at the bottom of the barrel."

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