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Ordinance to benefit farmers

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Local farmers hope to reap the benefits of a proposed new county ordinance.

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Local farmers will soon be able to sell what they grow – and even what they don't grow – with more ease and less regulatory red tape if plans for a new farming ordinance come to fruition.

County officials met with area growers recently to continue the ongoing process of drafting new regulations.

The proposed ordinance would allow farmers to have larger roadside stands, farmers' markets and U-pick facilities. It would also provide for more value-added items such as food and non-food items not grown on the premises.

What the proposed ordinance will mean for local farmers, said County Planner Donna Allen, is a second chance.

"The times are changing and farmers need to find ways to maximize their own dollars and crops," said Allen. "Right now, farmers can only sell what they have on their property, and that is no longer adequate."

Under current county guidelines, farmers are prohibited from operating grower stands or U-pick areas larger than 400 square feet. They are also barred from selling anything they don't grow on their property.

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But with the proposed new ordinance, farmers could operate stands up to 3,500 square feet and include a variety of non-agricultural items, as well as items not grown on their individual properties, such as olive oils, jams and jellies.

"It's complicated to change existing laws, and when the county first put the county Ag core in place it was so restricted," said Kathryn Lyddan, Executive Director of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust. "But what this will do is make it possible for this area to start building some agriculture tourism. Marin, Sonoma and Yolo counties have done this and Livermore has had great success with their wineries ... It's been a long process but I think we are very close to making it happen."

The idea for the realignment of current agricultural guidelines began nearly three years ago when it became increasingly clear to area farmers that county restrictions were on the way to putting them out of business.

Struggling for decades, farmers in this agriculturally rich core have urged the county to ease restrictions to allow for a more market-friendly environment, and to allow growers to operate such things as commercial kitchens and wineries on their property.


It is hoped that this new ordinance will ease farmers' financial burdens.

"We have some of the most agriculturally rich soil anywhere," said Allen. "And farmers want to take advantage of that natural resource. This ordinance expands on that idea tremendously ... I see this as a giant step forward."

Allen said the plan is for the final draft of the ordinance to go before the County Planning Commission in April, and then on to the Board of Supervisors in May.

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