



MEMO

DATE: April 25, 2011
TO: District Board of Directors
FROM: William J. Keene, General Manager
RE: Workshop – District Programs and Future Direction

Background

In November 1990, Sonoma County voters passed Measures A and C, which created the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and authorized a ¼% sales tax over a 20-year period to protect agricultural and open space lands throughout the County. In November 2006, through the passage of Measure F, the sales tax was reauthorized by a 76% vote, providing a dedicated funding source for the District through March 2031. Since its inception, the District has become recognized as one of the top conservation organizations in the nation and is one of the few land protection agencies funded through a sales tax. To date, the District has protected over 85,000 acres of agricultural, scenic, natural resource and recreational lands.

District Overview

Programs

District conservation efforts are guided by the voter-approved Expenditure Plan in Measure F and its Board-adopted acquisition plan, *Connecting Communities and the Land* (Plan). The District prioritizes acquisitions based on goals, objectives, and policies developed for each of four categories identified in the Plan: 1) Farms and Ranches; 2) Greenbelts and Scenic Hillside; 3) Water, Wildlife and Natural Areas; and 4) Recreation and Education. Land acquisition is primarily accomplished through the purchase of conservation easements; however the District may also purchase land outright, typically for outdoor recreation. District conservation projects often achieve multiple objectives of more than one category, therefore resulting in a balanced program. Conservation planning seeks to identify high priority areas for protection and enhances the District's strategic partnerships to complement efforts of other land conservation agencies and non-profit organizations.

Through its Matching Grant Program, the District assists cities, agencies and non-profit partners with acquisition or development projects to enhance and restore natural areas, create urban open space, and provide public recreation. Since 1992, the District has awarded over \$19 million in grant funding for 21 projects under this program.

The District is responsible for monitoring nearly 75,000 acres of land protected through the District's conservation easements and 2,600 acres of open space easements conveyed through the County's development process. Easement protected lands are owned in fee by private landowners, non-profits, or public agencies. Stewardship of District easements is conducted according to the Board-adopted Stewardship Manual, and includes monitoring of the property, processing permitted use requests and amendments, enforcing easement provisions, and addressing violations. As the easements are granted in perpetuity, the District has a long-term commitment and responsibility for property stewardship.

Currently, the District holds 7,663 acres of land in fee, acquired to maintain open space and greenbelts, protect natural resources, and provide recreational opportunities. Challenging issues associated with fee property stewardship include vegetation and fire management, invasive species, and illegal activities by trespassers. The District coordinates maintenance activities to protect the current status of each property. On properties that support recreational uses, appropriate levels of public access are or will be provided. In some cases, the District completes capital improvements such as construction of trails and related amenities and restoration of habitat for fish and wildlife.

In 2009, the Board approved the District's Strategic Plan that identifies nine initiatives that complement the District's core functions. The initiatives include opening District lands for public access, working with our partners to support agricultural sustainability, and watershed protection to ensure clean water in Sonoma County. Implementation of these initiatives includes collaboration with partners on climate change and ecosystem services initiatives. Additionally, the District continues to expand District programs to connect underserved communities through park planning efforts, matching grants, and public outings and educational programs.

Challenges and Opportunities

Sales tax revenue for the District reached its peak in FY 06-07 at \$19.9 million, and has steadily declined in subsequent years. From FY 08-09 to FY 09-10, the District experienced an 11.6% decline in sales tax revenues. The economic downturn has also impacted the financial capacity and resources of our agency and non-profit partners, posing additional challenges for the District's land protection and stewardship efforts. This has affected the ability of the District to transfer recreational properties to park entities, therefore increasing the District's land management responsibilities. Additionally, there is increased demand for public access on District-protected lands which requires investment in planning, capital improvements, and ongoing maintenance.

After the passage of Measure F, the District sold \$98 million of revenue bonds to take advantage of land conservation opportunities. These acquisitions resulted in protection of 26 properties, totaling 9868 acres throughout Sonoma County, including Poff, Taylor Mountain, Sonoma Mountain Ranch, Roche Ranch, and Clover Springs. In FY 11-12, annual debt service of \$7.5 million on the bond will begin.

The District proposes to ensure a balanced program through leveraging of its partnerships, legislative programs, and investments through its land conservation efforts. The District also has a continued dedicated funding stream through 2031 with extension of the ¼% sales tax authorized by the passage of Measure F.

Recommended Direction

To address these challenges and maximize the District's opportunities, the General Manager is recommending that the Board direct staff to 1) prepare a work plan to identify 3-year program priorities; and 2) prepare a plan for District fee lands.