April 20, 2018

Subject: Urban Growth and Conservation

Reporting Period: January 2018 – April 2018

Staff Lead: Emily Tibbott, Strategic Growth Council

Recommended Action:

For information only – no action required.

Summary:

As part of the Urban Growth and Conservation Program (UGCP) strategy regarding the station community of Gilroy, staff has focused considerable attention on the conservation of natural and working lands near Gilroy and more generally in southern Santa Clara Valley, in an effort to help define urban growth patterns. Two key strategies include providing technical assistance as to public conservation funding and facilitating access to biological and other data to help guide protection efforts, including advancing collaboration among stakeholders towards this end.

Santa Clara County

Starting late last year, SGC staff intensified partnership activities with environmental interests in Santa Clara County and High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) northern region staff, with a principal role to facilitate a continued productive collaboration and meaningful conservation outcomes. There is a robust conservation community in the County, and mutually beneficial information sharing has taken place through ongoing interactions, leading to a more effective HSRA wildlife movement plan as well as coordination on regional mitigation. As an important milestone in this relationship, the Department of Conservation’s Agricultural Lands Mitigation Program announced in December an award of roughly $3.4 million in High Speed Rail Authority funds to support a strategic agricultural conservation easement acquisition near the City of Morgan Hill; the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (OSA) was a co-applicant. Much of the property is prime farmland under the State designation, and is an agricultural preservation priority area in Morgan Hill’s General Plan. Additionally, it is in the City’s southeast quadrant, an area faced with intense development pressure, and its conservation is intended to help stem that pressure.

In February, SGC organized and hosted a presentation to several State agencies and departments on the recently completed Santa Clara Valley Agricultural Plan. Funded by the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program, the Plan is a joint effort by Santa Clara County and the OSA, and includes land use policy, conservation easement, economic development, and education strategies. The easement acquisition described above is identified as a priority in the Agricultural Plan. Additionally, the OSA completed the first AB 2087 Regional Conservation Investment Strategy late last year, with the public comment period just finished. SGC staff are in conversation with the OSA regarding ways to support both plans going forward, especially at their geographic intersection, especially with technical assistance regarding public funding. Given the ground-breaking work underway in Santa Clara County and State support,
we intend to seek opportunities to highlight these efforts in various venues over the remainder of the Administration.

**City of Gilroy**

In Gilroy, at the direction of the City Council, HSRA staff reviewed three additional alignment options paralleling US 101 over the latter part of 2017. At the December 5, 2017 Council meeting, the HSRA reported on its findings that none of the additional alignments is superior to those currently under review; hence, these options are no longer under consideration. At this point in time, Gilroy City officials have not finalized their preference on station location, with downtown and east side locations both under consideration.

**Background:**

Along the High Speed Rail corridor, 24 station areas are envisioned, some in major population centers and others in more rural contexts, particularly the Central Valley. These stations will have significant impacts on their surrounding communities as well as implications for how these communities grow. Each station area has or will receive a grant from the High Speed Rail Authority to assist with elements such as station siting, design, retail development, housing, and other land use considerations, with a principal focus on the area within a half-mile radius of the station. Stations are expected to bring economic opportunity and vitality, facilitate multi-modal transportation options, and encourage transit-oriented and compact development. While planning effectively for downtown development is critical to high speed rail success, an explicit focus on protection of the open space and agricultural lands values that in many cases provide the backdrop for these communities is equally important.

The Urban Growth and Conservation (UGC) Program, an initiative of the Strategic Growth Council, aims to help high speed rail station area geographies plan sustainably for the growth anticipated with the advent of the train. The Program goal is to assist station area communities in rural settings to protect urban open space values, as well as implement mechanisms for more efficient growth such that adjacent farm and ranch lands are protected, with a particular focus on the City of Gilroy. Further, the Program includes a focus on county level efforts at natural and working lands conservation which may have an additional benefit of helping define and limit development patterns; with respect to Gilroy, staff have focused on conservation efforts in Santa Clara County. Further, UGC includes a focus on State-level policy and programmatic activities that support and reinforce local efforts.