

October 18, 2021

Dave Feinstein, Planning Manager
Dept. of Community Development
City Hall
1000 Webster Street
Fairfield, CA. 94533

Dear Mr. Feinstein:

RE: Fairfield Forward 2050 Draft Alternatives

Thank you for the opportunity to review the alternatives and attend the October 16th Workshop on the Draft Land Use Alternatives for the Fairfield Forward 2050 General Plan Update. While I support many of the proposals in Alternative 2, unfortunately, all of the alternatives included urban expansion into Suisun Valley which I do not support. This proposed expansion into the Valley represents a significant change to past City policy to protect Suisun Valley from urban encroachment and support ongoing commercial agriculture in the Valley. A fourth alternative should be prepared which shows a land use pattern that excludes the expansion of urbanization within Suisun Valley.

As the City has proceed with the Fairfield Forward program, there appears to be little, if any, engagement with the Suisun Valley agricultural community. Furthermore, the alternative proposals for Suisun Valley are inconsistent with many of the 2008 Solano County General Plan and Suisun Valley Strategic Plan policies and programs. While there is a long history of the City and County working together to address land use issues there appears to be little engagement with the County beyond the initial stakeholder interview. The proposed land use changes in Suisun Valley presented in all three alternatives, will create significant impacts to the Valley and farming community and the County's ongoing program to protect the Valley and support commercial agriculture and agricultural tourism. Consequently, I am asking the City to take the following actions:

1. The City needs to reach out directly to the Suisun Valley agricultural community. The City is proposing changes in all three alternatives that directly impact ongoing agricultural operations in the Valley and sets the stage for long term impacts to the larger Suisun Valley community.
2. The City needs to engage with the County given the potential conflicts between the City alternative proposals to the County's policies and ongoing planning programs to protect the Valley from urban encroachment and to support commercial agricultural within the Valley.
3. The City needs to prepare a fourth draft alternative which does not encroach urbanization into Suisun Valley by retaining the existing urban limit line around the Valley, builds upon concepts in the other alternatives supporting higher density, mixed use, pedestrian and transit-oriented neighborhoods, and community centers, and to consider additional housing opportunities through Accessory Dwelling Units.

I have also included comments on the Existing Land Use Figure 2-2. in the Alternatives Report. During a quick windshield survey, I found a number of classification errors of land uses depicted on the map which creates a misleading impression that the Valley is already transforming to residential use. At the workshop, I was asked to identify these errors. These include a number parcels classified as Rural Residential when they are in fact in full agricultural production and a 40-acre multifamily classification on vacant property. I would request that the City field check the existing land use within Suisun Valley to correct these errors.

SUISUN VALLEY AGRICULTURE COMMUNITY

The planning program has identified the City as three separate and distinct areas by its land use pattern: Cordelia, Central Fairfield and Northeast Fairfield. But there is a fourth Community that the City needs to recognize, the Suisun Valley Agricultural Community. This community, located within the planning area, is an integral part of the larger Fairfield community and part of its identity. This community is not only important to the City of Fairfield but to the agricultural economy of the County.

The existing City General Plan recognized the importance of Suisun Valley agriculture and the unique opportunities the Valley provides to the City. Under the current General Plan, Fairfield remained committed to protection of agriculture areas outside the urban limit line. The City has worked and supported County, SID and others to protect and promote Suisun Valley agriculture and has helped fund some of this work.

The City, through the stakeholder interviews, received comments from the County, SLT and others identifying the protection of the surrounding agricultural land as “major priority for the GPU”, citing the economic importance of the areas agricultural production and as being an integral part of the City’s identity. However, there was no direct engagement with the Suisun Valley Agricultural Community such as the Suisun Valley Vintners and Growers Association or the Suisun Valley Fruit Growers Association nor were they included in the stakeholder interviews.

The City needs to reach out directly to the Suisun Valley agricultural community. The City is proposing changes in all three alternatives that directly impact ongoing agricultural operations in the Valley and sets the stage for long term impacts to the larger Suisun Valley community.

HISTORY OF PAST PLANNING EFFORTS

There is a long history of planning, programs and actions conducted to protect and promote Suisun Valley agriculture by the City of Fairfield, Solano County, Solano Irrigation District (SID), Solano Land Trust (SLT), Solano County Economic Development Corporation (SEDCORP) and farmers over the last 45 years. During this time, Fairfield understood the importance of Suisun Valley to the local economy and showed a strong commitment to protect, maintain and improve the viability of agriculture in the area. I think it is important to understand the actions taken to date by the City and other organizations to protect and promote Suisun Valley Agriculture. The following are some examples of these actions.

1975 West Central General Plan

In 1975 the City and County adopted a joint general plan for the Cordelia, Green Valley and Suisun Valley area. This plan established the Cordelia Growth Center. It was designed specifically to be a separate self-contained community. Rather than the City continuing to expand west into Suisun Valley, one of the principal reasons for establishing a new growth center in Cordelia was to bypass and protect the Suisun Valley Agriculture area. As part of the plan, an urban limit line was established around the new Cordelia Growth center beyond which the city agreed not to extend municipal services (sewer, water, etc.). The principal was simply stated "what is urban shall be municipal", meaning that urban development requiring municipal services would only be provided through city annexation within the urban limit boundary.

1974 Fairfield, SID and Solano Flood Control and Water District Agreement

In order to provide water to serve the new Anheuser-Busch Brewery, the City constructed a new water treatment plant located by Rancho Solano to serve the brewery through construction of a new water pipeline down Abernathy Road. Concerns raised by SID, the County, the farming community and others that the pipeline would open the door to potential urbanization within the Valley. To address this concern, in 1974 Fairfield, SID and the Board of Supervisors acting as the County Flood Control and Water District entered into an agreement where the city agreed not to provide domestic water service with Suisun Valley both north and south of I-80. In 2002, Fairfield and SID extended the agreement to 2010.

Agricultural Rezoning

When zoning was established in Solano County in the late 1950s, Suisun Valley was initially zoned Agriculture (A-10) with a minimum parcel size of 10 acres. In the mid 1970's, Suisun Valley began to experience parcellation of properties where properties were being subdivided down to their minimum parcel size of 10 acres. Concerns were raised about the continued viability of commercial agriculture on these small parcels, and how to maintain farmable size parcels of land. The County responded by establishing a new zoning district, Agriculture (A-40) with a 40-acre minimum parcel and rezoned Suisun Valley to A-40 in order to maintain farmable units of land.

1980 Solano County Land Use and Circulation Element

The 1980 Land Use and Circulation Element expanded the Urban Limit Line concept from the West Central General Plan to encompass other urban areas in the County including the City of Fairfield. The plan identified "essential agricultural lands" that are productive farmlands identified by the local community as necessary to maintain a healthy agricultural economy that should be protected. Suisun Valley was identified as essential agriculture, with high quality soils and irrigated lands.

Solano Land Trust (SLT)

Solano Land Trust was founded in 1986 as the Solano County Farmlands and Open Space Foundation as a result of open space advocates, land developers and a municipal government working together to benefit the whole community. This unusual genesis created the structure for a board of directors that reflects all sides of land-use issues united in the mission to preserve the agricultural legacy and natural landscapes of Solano County and enhance people's relationship to the land. SLT is engaged in a wide range of programs to protect open space to support the local farming community including Suisun Valley.

1992 Fairfield General Plan

The 1992 Fairfield General Plan established an urban limit line around the city's existing and planned areas for urbanization. The urban limit line excluded urbanization of Suisun Valley recognizing the economic importance of the Valley and directing the City's growth away from these important farmlands and prime agricultural soils. The General Plan included a separate Agricultural Element with policies that continued its strong commitment to the protection of Suisun Valley agricultural lands, and encouraging the preservation and expansion of the local agricultural economy, including a policy to permanently protect Suisun Valley.

Suisun Valley Fund

In 2002 the Suisun Valley Fund was established and funded by the City of Fairfield and SID to preserve and enhance agriculture in Suisun Valley including efforts to promote and market Suisun Valley as a destination and promote and market the agriculture products produced in the valley. Through this action alone, the City showed its commitment to and recognition of the importance and value that Valley's agriculture activities bring to the City and the need to support and strengthen them. In 2008 the Suisun Valley Fund Advisory Committee developed a marketing plan for the Valley. Funding for the project ended in 2010.

2008 Solano County General Plan

As part of the 2008 General Plan program, the Solano Agriculture Commission contracted with the UC Davis Agricultural Issue Center to conduct an agricultural study of the County. The study identified 10 unique agricultural areas, including Suisun Valley, which each faced unique issues and challenges. As part of the General Plan program, the County conducted a special study of Suisun Valley and developed specific policies and program to maintain the agricultural character, improved agricultural protection and income, establish Agricultural Tourist Centers and infrastructure improvements needed to support increased tourism.

2010 Suisun Valley Strategic Plan

Following adoption of the 2008 General Plan, the County worked with the Suisun Valley farming community to develop a detail plan to implement the General Plan policies. The plan describes changes

in land use to establish Agricultural Tourist Centers, and circulation and infrastructure needs to transform Suisun Valley into a regional tourist destination while continuing to support long-term viable agriculture. The plan builds on the 2008 Suisun Valley Fund marketing plan and efforts to improve the economic conditions in the Valley. It established design guidelines to enhance and sustain the rural character of the Valley. Finally, the plan developed new zoning districts designed to specifically address the needs of Suisun Valley including Agricultural Tourist Center (ACT-1 and ACT-2) and Agriculture-Suisun Valley (AG-SV-20) which increase flexibility for agriculture uses outlined in the General Plan.

SUISUN VALLEY LAND USE

As noted above, the 2008 Solano County General Plan designates Suisun Valley as Agriculture with 8 Neighborhood Agricultural/Tourist Centers (See attached Solano County General Plan Land Use Diagram). As part of the General Plan program, the County conducted a special study of Suisun Valley and developed specific policies and program to maintain the agricultural character, improve agricultural production and income, establish Agricultural Tourist Centers, and infrastructure improvements need to support increased tourism. A Strategic Plan for Suisun Valley followed which developed a more detailed plan to implement the Suisun Valley General Plan policies.

Draft Fairfield Forward Alternatives- Suisun Valley

The three Alternative land use plans prepared for Fairfield Forward all propose some form of urbanization in lower Suisun Valley in order to make a “physical urban connection” between Cordelia and Central Fairfield. The reasons given during discussion at the Alternative Workshop was a desire to physically connect the Cordelia Urban Area to Central Fairfield, in part, so that Cordelia residence would feel more connected to Fairfield. In essence, Suisun Valley is now being look at as a barrier to conductivity between the growth centers rather than an asset. This urban corridor connection “principle” or “strategy” is not reflected in the Draft Vision and Guiding Principles document and is not consistent with several of the guiding principles, but never the less, seems to have been given priority.

For example, principle #1 states “Focus development in areas that are already served by city infrastructure and services, such as sewers, roads, and fire protection to promote sustainable growth patterns.” Extension of urban services into Suisun Valley would not only service the proposed urbanization but creates pressure for further expansion of urbanization in the valley since urban services are now available to support such development. It was this concern that led to the 1974 Fairfield /SID agreement over the city’s water line extension through the Valley to serve Anheuser-Busch brewery. The agreement essentially prohibited the provision of Fairfield domestic water in the Valley without significant penalty so as to not open the door for urbanization. Over the years, the County received numerous inquiries for new residential subdivisions, two new golf courses, a driving range in the Valley and 1974 agreement along with the urban limit line was a key tool in protecting the Valley.

The extension of urban services can also trigger increase land speculation which in turn increases property values in the adjoining areas making property less affordable for the next generation of farms.

While the County has a right to farm ordinance, expansion of urbanization into the Valley opens up potential conflicts between residences and farm operations including residential concerns about dust, agricultural spraying, noise, and agricultural trespass. This can lead to the idling of agricultural lands if these impacts become severe enough.

Where the guiding principles talk about “connectivity” it does so in a different fashion. The document states under principle #2, “Enhance connectivity across the city and to other surrounding areas by completing trails (such as the Linear Park Trail), creating new paths and strengthening neighborhood links to transportation hubs, such as the train station or transportation center”, not as an urban corridor. Creating an urban corridor through Suisun Valley will not make residents in Cordelia necessarily feel more connected to Central Fairfield. It is through community outreach and engagement that will help to bring a greater sense of community such as the strategies outlined under Principle #9 Create Community Cohesion and Sense of Place by Celebrating and Showcasing Fairfield Diversity.

The importance of Suisun Valley agriculture is highlighted in Principle #5 which states “Preserve Fairfield’s natural, agricultural and open space surroundings which contribute to its visual identity, biodiversity and economic strength”. “Increase opportunities for residents and visitors to experience and learn about the importance of surrounding area’s ecological benefits and noteworthy agricultural output” and “promote connections between local growers and the local food system to both support farmers’ economic viability and expand access to healthy locally grown produce among all Fairfield residents”. Suisun Valley is a key agricultural and open space resource right that can support these policies in the heart of the city. This is further expanded in the Fairfield Forward Existing Conditions report under the Key Findings and Planning Considerations in Chapter 2, Land Use, including the following.

Finding #5 “Preservation of Agriculture and Open Space lands is important for economic, sustainability and recreation reasons, among others” The finding goes on to state “Fairfield is surrounded by agricultural and open space lands such as Vaca Mountains and Suisun Marsh. Agricultural lands, in particular in Green Valley and Suisun Valley, are important economic drivers for the area.” “Minimizing pressures to develop at the city’s edges through an emphasis on infill development will be an important focus of the General Plan in order to preserve these key resources in Fairfield.”

These Principles and Findings are not reflected in the Alternative land uses proposals for Suisun Valley.

County General Plan and Suisun Valley Strategic Plan

2008 Solano County General Plan identified Suisun Valley, comprised of Prime Agriculture soils, as one of 10 unique agricultural areas in the County and was the focus of a special study area as part of the 2008 General Plan update. The Suisun Valley Policies and programs were developed through a number of resident driven workshops. Policies and programs focused on:

1. Policies to maintain the agricultural character of the area through appropriate zoning and prevention of incompatible uses;

2. Policies to help agriculture-related business become more profitable by reducing barriers and streamlining approval process;
3. Policies to facilitate value added activities including agricultural processing into finished products were ingredients as grown both on site and off site.
4. Policies to support the creation of small tourist-oriented centers, considered critical to the future viability of agriculture in the valley.
5. Policies to improve circulation and infrastructure to support agricultural tourism.

The General Plan identified eight agricultural tourist centers, four which would be eliminated under the Fairfield Forward Alternatives.

The Suisun Valley 2010 Strategic Plan builds on the policies and programs of the 2008 General Plan with more specific proposals and programs including:

1. Reduced minimum parcel size to 20 acres to make property more affordable to the next generation of farms will still retaining economic viability.
2. Provisions for value added agriculture including agricultural processing of products both on and off site.
3. Agriculture centers to provide opportunities for overnight accommodations, restaurants and tasking rooms and other use to support agricultural tourism.
4. Programs to support marketing efforts to support agricultural tourism and agricultural products from the Valley.
5. Design guidelines that protect the Valley's agricultural character.
6. Specific infrastructure improvements to support Agricultural Tourism.

All of these actions were designed to continue the County's strong commitment to protect, support and promote commercial agriculture in Suisun Valley.

Finally, finding #3 under the Existing Conditions Report states: "There are several County and City Land Use Plans that are pertinent to the Planning area. The information in these plans should align the General Plan update". The finding goes on to state "...policies for the unincorporated areas of the Sphere of Influence and Planning Area should be consistent with those of the Solano County General Plan and other County planning documents."

Because of the conflicts in policy and land uses in Suisun Valley between 2008 Solano County General Plan and 2010 Suisun Valley Strategic Plan and the proposals presented in the three Fairfield Forward Alternatives:

The City needs to engage with the County given the potential conflicts between the City alternative proposals to the County's policies and ongoing planning programs to protect the Valley from urban encroachment and to support commercial agricultural within the Valley.

PREPARATION OF A FORTH ALTERNATIVE

Prior to selecting a “Preferred Alternative”, the City needs to prepare a fourth alternative developed around the concept of protecting Suisun Valley from urban encroachment by retaining the existing urban limit line around the Valley. This alternative can incorporate concepts from some of other alternatives supporting higher density, mixed use, and pedestrian and transit-oriented neighborhoods.

The impact of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) within our existing neighborhoods has not been considered in any of the Alternatives. Recently legislation streamlines the approval process, funding availability and other changes make ADUs more affordable and easier to develop. Over the 30-year time frame of the Draft General Plan, ADUs can significantly increase the inventory of residences within the existing residential neighborhoods as well as addressing housing affordably and should be incorporated in this forth alternative.

Other concepts that might be considered in this alternative include:

Cordelia Junction. Rather than trying to create a new transit-oriented community and a train station in Suisun Valley, isolated from the rest of the community by Nelson Hill to the west, the city should explore opportunities to more centrally locate the station in Cordelia where it would be more accessible to the community and explore reorienting the Cordelia Junction towards a train station.

New Residential Neighborhoods. There are two areas identified in Alternative 1: the area around Business Center Drive extension to highway 12, and the area along the west side of I-80 across from Paradise Valley. The City could expand into these areas, if necessary, with potentially minimal impacts to surrounding agriculture and open space areas rather than into Suisun Valley. These could be developed as new neighborhoods with community centers and mix of low medium and higher density development.

Suisun Valley Industrial. Within the south area of Suisun Valley, is the Cordelia Winery, a large multi-million-dollar processing facility and winery operation. The winery processes grapes from outside and within the Valley. Large new vineyards adjacent to the facility have been and are being planted to help support the winery which are located in the area planned in the industrial use in Suisun Valley in Alternatives 1 and 3 and new a residential community in the Valley in Alternative 2. The fourth alternative should explore other potential locations for Industrial uses outside the Valley.

Agrihood. Alternative 3 proposes to create a Agrihood, defined as residential neighborhood to protect agriculture. In reality these end up being residential subdivision creating “hobby farms” or urban density housing that replaces traditional landscaping with an agricultural landscape which have limited productive agricultural value and does not best utilize the prime agricultural lands in Suisun Valley.

The City needs to prepare a fourth draft alternative which does not encroach urbanization into Suisun Valley by retaining the existing urban limit line around the Valley, builds upon concepts in the other alternatives supporting higher density, mixed use, pedestrian and transit-oriented neighborhoods, and community centers, and to consider additional housing opportunities through Accessory Dwelling Units.

ALTERNATIVE REPORT – Existing Land Use

Figure 2-2 in the Alternative Report depicts existing land use in the City and in much of the surrounding planning area. While there is no reference to the source, there substantial errors in the existing land uses depicted in Suisun Valley and inconsistency in how land use classification are applied to properties. The current uses as reflected on the map gives the impression that significant areas of the Valley have been converted to Rural Residential and are no longer in commercial agricultural use when in fact these properties are in agricultural production.

There needs to be an on the ground survey to correct the land use classification and verify the existing land uses. I was asked at the alternative work shop to provide some examples of the issues. This is not an exhaustive list, but based on a quick windshield survey just prior to the workshop. I was asked at the workshop to provides some examples:

Mankus Corner Road

On the north side of Mancus Corner Road adjacent to the City limits, the first 20 acre parcel next to the school has a home with the rest of the property is in vineyard production. The next 20 acre parcel to the east also has a home with the rest of the property is also in vineyard production. The first is identified as Agriculture and second as Rural Residential. This inconsistency occurs throughout the Valley.

Suisun Valley Road

On the east side of Suisun Valley Road across from the cemetery, approximately 140 acres have been identified as Rural Residential. While I suspect that this designation has be applied to the whole of an ownership, since there are no property lines and given the acreage, it gives an impression that a significant Rural Residential community has been established in the middle of the Valley. In fact, there is a large existing home and out building, but the rest of the property is in full agricultural production.

Corner of Abernathy and Rockville Roads

North west of intersection surrounding the drying plant, parcels are shown as Rural Residential but the areas behind the homes fronting the road are currently in corn production. The north east corner of the intersection is shown as Rural Residential when in fact it is in orchard.

Suisun Valley Parkway

The Rural Residential designation the north side of Suisun Valley Parkway west of Abernathy Road has no residential use on the property. It is developed as an agricultural equipment corp. yard.

Busch Drive and Hale Ranch Road

South of I-80 west of the intersection of Hale Ranch Road and Busch Drive, approximately 40 acres are identified as Multi-family Residential. This gives the impression that the County has already encroached into Suisun Valley with an urban non-agricultural residential use. In fact, the property is vacant with a small PG&E substation.

General Commercial

There are two areas identified as General Commercial which are in agricultural use: one is a winery and vineyard and the other is olive oil processing and tasting and an olive orchard.

In summary, over the past 45 years, the County, Fairfield, SID, SLT and the Suisun Valley farming community have work proactively, in many cases in partnership, to protect and support the agricultural industry in Suisun Valley. It is my hope that the City will continue to see the value that Suisun Valley adds to the City of Fairfield, the importance of continuing to protect the Valley from urban encroachment, and to continue to support farming community.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions concerning my comments. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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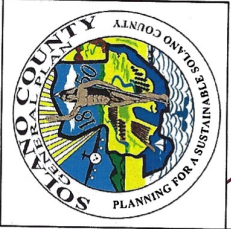
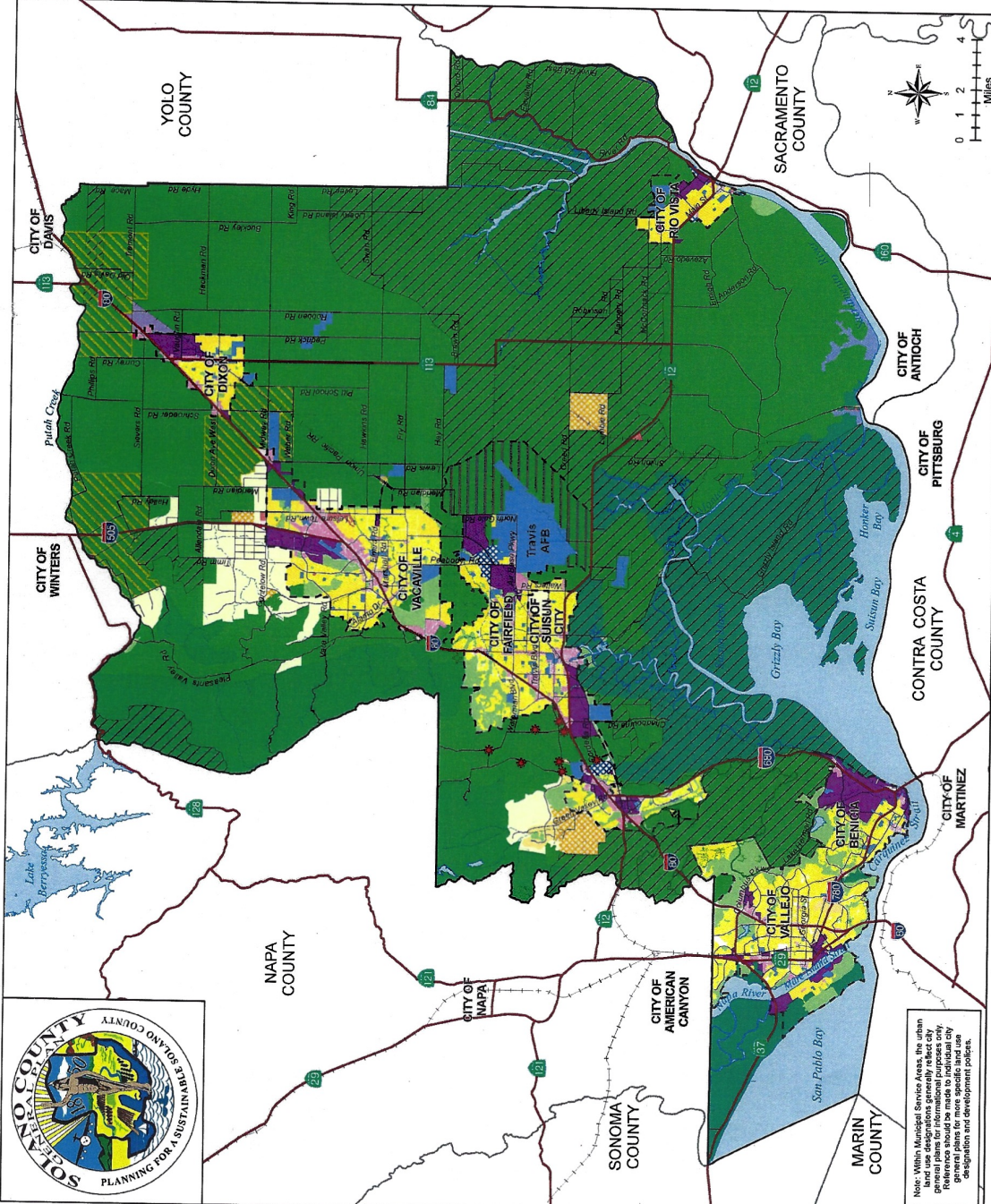
cc: Birgitta Corsello, County Administrator
Terry Schmidtbauer, Director of Resource Management
Allan Calder, Planning Manager
Nicole Braddock, Executive Director, Solano Land Trust

2008 Solano County General Plan

Figure LU-1

Land Use Diagram

- Legend**
- General Plan Land Use Designations**
 - Natural Resource Designations
 - Water Bodies and Courses
 - Park and Recreation
 - Marsh
 - Agricultural Designations
 - Watershed
 - Agriculture
 - Public Designations
 - Public/Quasi-Public
 - Residential Designations
 - Rural Residential
 - Traditional Community - Residential
 - Traditional Community - Mixed Use
 - Urban Residential
 - Commercial Designations
 - Neighborhood Commercial
 - Neighborhood Agricultural/Tourist Center
 - Commercial Recreation
 - Services Commercial
 - Highway Commercial
 - Urban Commercial
 - Industrial Designations
 - General Industrial
 - Limited Industrial
 - Water Dependent Industrial
 - Urban Industrial
 - Special Purpose Areas**
 - Joint Study Area
 - Specific Project Area
 - Urban Project Area
 - Overlays**
 - Vacaville-Fairfield-Solano Greenbelt
 - Travis Reserve Area
 - Agricultural Reserve Overlay
 - Tri-City/County Cooperative Planning Area
 - Resource Conservation Overlay



Note: While Municipal Service Areas, the urban and use designations generally reflect city general plans for informational purposes only. The map does not indicate city general plans for more specific land use designation and development policies.