

A VISION FOR SUISUN VALLEY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

7/20/07

The Suisun Valley Fund Advisory Committee has adopted the following “Vision for the future of farming in Suisun Valley” (Vision):

Suisun Valley is a unique farming region that supports profitable family farms and quality of life for all its residents. It is a destination for tourists seeking world class wine, identifiable Suisun Valley farm products and a beautiful agricultural landscape with no fallow land. The SV appellation is so famous that it creates new markets and increases demand for Suisun Valley wine and other farm products outside of the region.

From Final Report, “Agricultural Vision and Economic Innovation for Suisun Valley,” prepared for the Solano County Agricultural Department by American Farmlands Trust Consulting, March 2007 (AFT Report), with partial funding from the Suisun Valley Fund

The Committee is now challenged with how to make this Vision a reality. The Committee has an immediate need to provide useful input, based on the Vision, to the Solano County General Plan Update now underway.

The Committee has the following specific recommendation for the General Plan Update:

1. Solano County should have an Agriculture element in its General Plan. The County should allow the legal vehicle of an Agricultural Enterprise Zone or “Overlay District” to encourage agriculture and agricultural economic development in Suisun Valley consistent with the above Vision. The County should assign staff resources specifically for the purpose of defining and establishing this legal vehicle in the General Plan and ordinances of the County. The Committee generally supports the efforts of the Suisun Valley Fruit Growers Association in formulating the characteristics of an Agricultural Enterprise Zone or Overlay District where not inconsistent with the Committee’s Vision or the recommendations in this paper.
2. At present, Solano Irrigation District (SID) and the City of Fairfield (City) are funding Suisun Valley strategic planning and economic development efforts through the Suisun Valley Fund and donated services. Notable successes have included the formation of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association and pending formation of the Suisun Valley Harvest Trails Association. The Fund expires at the end of 2010. Prior to the end of 2010, Solano County should provide a successor source of funding and staff resources to continue the work of the Suisun Valley Fund. The County should begin this transition by teaming with the Committee, SID, and City to take the steps

contained in the AFT Report's "Strategic Outline for Agricultural Advancement in Suisun Valley."

3. The AFT Report identified urban encroachment, land speculation, and the resulting pressure of high land prices as a concern to Suisun Valley agriculture, but did not provide recommendations because of the specific scope of the study. The County and Committee should expand the AFT study scope to further investigate and obtain recommendations on these issues for the General Plan and beyond. Included in this work should be a rigorous economic analysis of the potential agricultural value of Suisun Valley.
4. The County should allow subdivision of larger parcels in Suisun Valley to smaller parcels of not less than 20-acre size if such size is found to be still suitable for specialty farming consistent with the Vision.
5. Through incentive programs that do not diminish the market value of land, the County should encourage marketing (sale or lease) of properties not now in agricultural production to farmers who wish to and will place fallow land into agricultural production. The County should establish an "incubator" farm program for new farmers with financial and technical support.
6. In order to capture maximum agricultural economic value, the County should direct resources toward making Suisun Valley a distinctive place and an agri-tourism destination consistent with the Vision.

Specific recommendations (based on AFT Report) that the Committee particularly favors to meet the Vision:

Encourage Agri-Tourism: Put Suisun Valley on the Map

- Develop more wineries to anchor agri-tourism and expand profitability for commercial growers.
- Make Suisun Valley a tourist destination using a family-oriented approach. Expand programs like "Fun Family Farm Days."
- Use agri-tourism efforts to link artists and art galleries with Suisun Valley heritage.

For further actions, see Madison County (North Carolina), Lancaster County (Pennsylvania), and Adopt-a-Vine Program (multi-jurisdictional) case studies from AFT Report.

Identify New Marketing and Branding Opportunities

- Connect Suisun Valley to “Buy Local, Buy Fresh” and “Locavore” campaigns within a 100-mile radius. Encourage transition from historic commodity crops to high-value specialty crops with emphasis on marketing efforts inside and outside of Suisun Valley supporting each other through quality brand recognition.
- Promote Suisun Valley logo and brand. Reestablish markets for agricultural products from Suisun Valley.
- Support local efforts to market the Suisun Valley AVA.

For further actions, see Pure Catskills Buy Local Campaign (New York), Puget Sound Fresh (Washington), Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture—CISA (Massachusetts), Farmer Mentor Program to Access Direct Marketing Channels (DelMarVa Peninsula) case studies from AFT Report.

Infrastructure Value Added

- By staff support, financing, and removal of regulator barriers, encourage communal “custom crush” facility(ies) to produce artisan wine from Suisun Valley grapes. Similarly, encourage communal wine tasting rooms specializing in wines produced from Suisun Valley grapes. Ensure barrel storage and other needed support infrastructure is available to support artisan wine activity. (Initial estimates show Solano County is losing over \$50 million in value-added economic impact with the current lack of adequate processing and distribution infrastructure for Suisun Valley grape production. Valley grape production is being exported to other counties for processing into bottled wine and eventual sale. Retention of this agricultural output within Solano County would be significantly improved through more contemporary land use practices and permitting, as exists in other wine industry counties.)
- Encourage establishment of other local support services for Suisun Valley agriculture, including cold storage, commercial kitchens, and other value-added processing facilities.
- Create permanent, full-time positions for County agricultural economic development specialists with expertise in County agricultural economic development programs. The positions would serve as advocates for agriculture within the County, would look out for new opportunities in a constantly changing local and world economy, and would assist farmers in transitioning to new ventures.
- Provide assistance in attracting the capital for the infrastructure needed to move large quantities of Suisun Valley products.

- Offer more educational programs; e.g., technical seminars on growing olives or other new crops uniquely suited to Suisun Valley, marketing and sales to support new ventures, and identifying mentors.

For further actions, see Farm Viability Enhancement Program (Massachusetts) case study in AFT Report.

Create a Farmer Friendly Regulatory Environment

- Allow more flexibility in regulatory interpretation of local laws for value added and agri-tourism. Have County regulators adopt a “can-do” attitude toward regulatory changes that will help farmers get into value-added businesses consistent with the Vision. Lower the cost of permitting both in dollars and time.
- Clarify the rules and create certainty with respect to regulations so that farmers can know whether or not to invest in new ventures.
- Advocate changes in state or federal law that may hinder local efforts to achieve the Vision.
- Promote voter initiatives that recognize the real costs of farmland preservation and translate community values into positive support for agriculture (e.g., see principles behind Suisun Valley Fund).

Help Suisun Valley Farmers Stay Competitive with Local and Global Markets

- Level the regulatory playing field. Allow Suisun Valley farmers to do what farmers in neighboring counties do consistent with achieving the Vision.
- Allow more on-site food processing and sales.
- Increase u-pick operations by providing affordable insurance program.
- Lower permitting costs for all activities consistent with the Vision.
- By regulatory change, encourage more retail use of property: Bed & breakfasts, farm stands, bakeries, restaurants, recreation uses and family-oriented attractions consistent with continued farm operations.

For further actions, see Value-Added Home-Based “Microprocessor” Project (Kentucky) and Hillsborough County Agricultural Industry Development Program (Florida) case studies from AFT Report.