



## SANTA CLARA COUNTY FOOD SYSTEM ALLIANCE

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October 23, 2014

Bill Shoe, Principal Planner  
County of Santa Clara, Planning Office  
70 West Hedding Street, 7th Floor  
San Jose, CA 95110

**RE: Santa Clara County Health Element, Public Review Draft**

Dear Mr. Shoe,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the County's Draft Health Element. We also appreciate your outreach to the Santa Clara County Food System Alliance (SCCFSA) to get our initial input during the crafting of this draft.

As you know, the SCCFSA is a collaborative of stakeholders concerned with issues of access to healthy food, local agricultural production, and food distribution in Santa Clara County. We seek to identify linkages and elements in the system where changes will promote healthier food choices by consumers, sustainable food production and distribution systems, and improvements to agricultural viability.

The SCCFSA has identified four main goals to create this change and attain a vibrant, robust and sustainable food system:

1. Enhance community engagement and education
2. Improve access to a healthy, affordable, food supply
3. Strengthen agricultural and food system
4. Advance environmental stewardship

In 2013, the SCCFSA released its [Assessment](#) of our county's food system. It contained key findings along with recommendations to address issues impeding our local food system. We are pleased to find that Section F: Healthy Eating, Food Access, and Sustainable Food Systems of the draft Health Element reflects some of these recommendations.

To further enrich the quality of life in our valley through a more sustainable, effective, and accessible food system, we ask the following be considered for inclusion into the Health Element:

1. Provide more comprehensive background information on the pressing need for local farmland preservation
2. Add language to HE-F.2 to enhance its interpretation
3. Support for public education of the challenges of farming at the urban/rural edge
4. Recognize the need for agricultural worker housing
5. Encourage and support the procurement of locally produced

food.

### **The Compelling Case for Preserving Farmland; it's simple, we're going to need them**

Recently, Pete Aiello, President of the Santa Clara County Farm Bureau and owner and general manager of Uesugi Farm in Gilroy, spoke of the difficulties farmers face in finding land in the county. "We have to beg and borrow ground every year...there's no more prime [farm] land to get our hands on. If it's prime and especially if it's got water, it's taken." Despite this, Aiello believes that agriculture in Santa Clara County "has a very promising future" so it is "extremely important to protect what we have left".

While Section F does identify some of the benefits and challenges of local food production, it is essential to recognize those factors that necessitate local farmland preservation.

To that end, we suggest the following be added under the heading of Key Challenges and Key Opportunities.

#### **Key Challenges**

- Increase in population and food production: As of 2010, it takes an estimated 1.6 million tons of food production annually to feed the county's population of 1.8 million. By 2060, an additional 400,000 tons of food production will be needed to feed the over 2 million people expected to reside in Santa Clara County. Yet, approximately 1300 acres of cropland per year in the county are converted on average to other uses. If this rate of conversion is sustained, Santa Clara County will lose all of its remaining cropland within 20 years suffering an irreversible blow to its local food production capability.
- Impacts of world food market on low-income households: Over one quarter of the county's residents do not meet the self-sufficiency standard. Rising prices of staple items affects these residents' ability to afford the essentials. With world food prices projected to rise as this century unfolds, low-income households in the county could be severely impacted. This may be especially so for seniors - the county's largest growing demographic - many of whom are likely to be living on modest retirement incomes. Further exacerbating this food access issue will be intensified competition among nations in world food markets due to increasing global population, growth in the economies and urbanization of developing countries, and climate change impacts. This may necessitate a greater reliance on local food production over time and thus the need for the land that produces this food.

Admittedly, saving Santa Clara County's remaining farmlands will not provide our county's total food needs. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that our community and communities throughout our region, state, and country have land use plans and policies that can impact our nation's remaining farmlands. So it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to preserve these resources whose value to our people and our nation will only increase over the coming years.

## Key Opportunities

- Recently enacted statewide legislation provides enhanced support for California’s food system including funding for farmland conservation. Local, regional, and statewide efforts are increasing the capacity to improve the state of local food systems.

### **Strategy #1: Preserve and enhance local agriculture and agricultural lands as part of the local/regional food system**

Strategy #1 cannot be stressed enough. One cannot enhance local agriculture, and hence food security, if farmland acreage continues to be converted to urban or other non-agricultural uses. Therefore, we ask that the following language be included in the description of Policy HE-F.2:

**HE-F.2 Agricultural land preservation.** Preserve agricultural and open space land by maintaining and implementing growth management policies that limit development outside urban areas and support farming and ranching. *Encourage local jurisdictions to carefully evaluate a suite of factors when contemplating the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses. Among the factors to consider are the land’s regional value, strategic location, availability of water, in addition to soil type and long-term economic viability of the farmland.*

The SCCFSA also encourages the inclusion of the following policies<sup>1</sup> which were originally suggested by Greenbelt Alliance in their letter to you dated September 25, 2014. These suggestions are in keeping with the recommendations in the SCCFSA [Assessment](#).

**Urban/rural edge connection.** Increase public awareness of the challenges of farming at the urban/rural edge. Public outreach and more thoughtful planning can alleviate this area of conflict and emphasize the urban/rural interdependence.

**Agricultural worker housing.** Address the need for local agricultural worker housing to support the significant amount of hand labor required to tend and harvest the county’s diversity of crops.

**Local food procurement.** Encourage wholesale produce companies in Santa Clara County to procure goods from local farms and source-identify farm origin. Food distributor wholesalers serve a critical function in the food system by connecting farmers to markets and allowing for efficient distribution of food among many end users.

**Local food ordinance.** Support local farmers by adopting a local food ordinance requiring County government departments to purchase locally produced foods served in the usual course of business.

### **An Element of Success**

The SCCFSA wishes to acknowledge the comprehensive and thoughtful nature of the Health Element. We commend the County Planning Department and the Public Health Department staff for their laudable efforts in crafting this document. Its importance is considerable in trying to provide a

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<sup>1</sup> With minor wording modifications

framework for addressing public health and social equity throughout the rest of the County General Plan and potentially the general plans of other jurisdictions in the county and beyond.

The SCCFSA is pleased to continue our service as a resource to the County and thanks staff and decision-makers for giving our suggestions due consideration.

Sincerely,

Santa Clara County Food System Alliance

c: Planning Commission, County of Santa Clara