

Farmers fear expressway planned for Grant Line Road could squeeze them out of business

Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee, 1-21-14

The city meets the country on Grant Line Road in southeastern Sacramento County: Subdivisions, restaurants and other developments lie to the west of the two-lane asphalt divide, while vineyards, grazing fields and other farmland lie to the east.

That division – held in place by county zoning that calls for farming east of Grant Line – has become fuzzier as development has expanded in Elk Grove and Rancho Cordova. Farmers worry that problems associated with urbanization will worsen when Grant Line is replaced by the Capital SouthEast Connector, a 35-mile expressway planned to run from Interstate 5 west of Elk Grove to Highway 50 in El Dorado County.

Farmers say they won't have adequate and safe access for farm machinery on the four- to six-lane, limited-access road. They also expect the expressway to expedite development in what is now the heart of the county's agriculture.

Tom Zlotkowski, executive director of the Capital SouthEast Connector Joint Powers Authority, said he can't fully respond to farmers' concerns until the project enters the design phase and begins to consider road access and other issues. The authority is planning a series of meetings with the assistance of the Sacramento County Farm Bureau to gather details, he said.

Voters approved \$118 million of the project's funding in 2004 as part of the Measure A sales tax, but the authority needs to find other sources for the rest of the \$456 million needed. The project has been promoted as a way to reduce congestion around Sacramento and increase economic development.

While construction isn't expected to begin for at least four years, farmers are raising concerns about the expressway because Sacramento County and other local governments soon will decide whether to amend their land-use plans to include the proposed route. Sacramento County supervisors expect to vote on the proposal next month.

Members of the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission, which governs city boundaries, recently cited the potential for losing farmland as a main reason for denying a request by Elk Grove to expand southeast of Grant Line. The two county supervisors on the board, though, voted in favor of the expansion.

Farmers aren't opposed to rebuilding Grant Line Road, as the two-lane road carries too much high-speed traffic for farmers to safely drive tractors and other equipment, said Charlotte Mitchell, executive director of the Sacramento County Farm Bureau. But they're very worried that the expressway, as proposed, will not allow them to continue farming, because they won't be able to transport equipment and goods, she said.

"We're hopeful that the authority will work with us," she said. "I hope it's more than lip service."

Jack Kautz, co-owner of Kautz Farms, said the only way the authority can build the expressway without crippling farmers is to build a frontage road along most of the route. His Ironstone Vineyards on Grant Line near Calvine Road has eight harvesters and 30 tractors that regularly use Grant Line during the three months of the annual harvest, he said.

Without a frontage road to replace Grant Line, the project "would pretty much stop the farming," he said.

Ironstone Vineyards, Vino Farms and other vineyards are located on Grant Line or nearby, and have helped to make Sacramento County one of the leading wine-grape producers in the state. Wine grapes are the county's highest valued crop, worth \$150 million annually.

The Cosumnes Community Planning Advisory Council discussed the expressway at four meetings before voting 5-2 last month to recommend that the county not amend its general plan to include the expressway route.

Concerns about farmers being able to use the expressway and frustration with the authority's responses to questions were the main reasons for the advisory council's denial, according to minutes from the December meeting.

"There were so many things (the authority) was vague and evasive about," said James Perham, a rancher on the advisory council.

Expressway project leader Zlotkowski told the Sacramento County Planning Commission this month that there's only so much that can be said about the planned road now, because the authority has not started designing it yet. Once that happens, he said, the authority can talk to property owners about access, turn lanes and other options that might help them.

The county planning commission voted 5-0 last week to recommend approval of the project, but its chairman said he was concerned about the authority's response to farmers, and encouraged Zlotkowski to improve communication with them.

Farmers want officials to use the general plan amendment to get assurances from the authority that the project will be built to their needs. Once local governments sign off on the route, they will lose the authority to influence the plan, according to members of the Cosumnes advisory council.

Mitchell of the Farm Bureau said she's not optimistic that county supervisors will help. "We're in a county where the cities and the county Board of Supervisors are not as appreciative of the agriculture and its economic contributions," she said.

As evidence, she cites the conversion of farm property approved by the county. From 1988 to 2010, more than 57,000 acres of farmland was converted to other uses in Sacramento County, state figures show. Thousands of additional acres of grazing land recently have been approved for eventual development, including the Cordova Hills project east of Grant Line Road.

Supervisor Don Nottoli, who represents the east county, said the amount of farmland taken out of service under the board's watch "speaks for itself." However, the board's updated development plan strikes a good balance between the needs of urban growth and agricultural protection, he said.

Nottoli, who is chairman of the authority's board, said the concerns about the expressway will require a "good deal of attention." He said it will be tough to build a limited-access expressway and meet the farmers' needs.

A report by the authority acknowledges that the expressway will require more farmland conversion – more than 2,500 acres to build and operate the road.

The expressway also will lead to housing and other development, according to another authority report. In the next 20 years, almost 100,000 housing units will be built in the project area. Some of those would be constructed without the expressway, but others will be accelerated once the project becomes certain, the report says.