

Sacramento pursuing plan to allow urban farms

Ryan Lillis, Sacramento Bee, 9-8-14

The view from the levee road above Nick Avdis' ranch is like a postcard of this city's past and present.

You can see his cattle, 60 head right now, grazing on acres of lush land. The neighbors' walnut trees are right there, too. Others nearby keep horses or chickens or peacocks.

But look past the barbed-wire fence around the Avdis ranch and you see a golden field ending suddenly at a subdivision of earth-tone homes that popped up during the housing boom. The sea of houses continues for miles, past Sleep Train Arena and all the way to the skyscrapers downtown.

From Valley View Acres, it all seems so peaceful, even the sprawl. This neighborhood is a thumb-shaped plot of ranches and small farms at the northern reaches of the city. It's also the only place in this city of nearly a half-million people where you can keep livestock and run a farm.

"Where else can you be 10 minutes from downtown and yet be worlds away?" Avdis said this week, sitting in his car on that levee road.

It's an experience that could soon be shared because city planners are working on a plan to allow urban farms in every corner of town.

They wouldn't allow livestock – except for those three hens we can already keep in our backyards – but would permit empty lots to be turned into commercial farms. You could see a 1-acre lot in a residential neighborhood – or an even bigger lot out by the warehouses along Power Inn Road – filled with lines of vegetables and fruit trees. The farmers who work those fields would be permitted to sell their goods.

The Planning Commission will begin the process of allowing urban farms with a hearing this Thursday night at City Hall. A new law could be on the books by the end of the year.

Community garden and health advocates have been pushing the city to allow farms everywhere in town.

"When we first heard about this, we were a little perplexed," city planner Tom Pace said. "Why would you want to put farms in the city? But the benefits became pretty clear."

Avdis sees it. He's 39 years old and a land-use attorney at a law firm on Capitol Mall. He's also the head of a close-knit neighborhood association up in Valley View Acres and sells grass-fed beef from cattle he raises. This is farm-to-fork before there was Farm-to-Fork.

Avdis grew up on his ranch and was drawn back for simple reasons: a connection to the land, and a strong desire for his two young children to experience the same.

"We keep advancing with technology, and we're losing some of our humanity," he said.

We might be able to share some of his experience by planting a farm in every neighborhood. Think about it – little pockets of the city's past right next to the present.