

EGGMAN REFOCUSSES ON SAVING FARMLAND

By **Kevin Parrish**

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SACRAMENTO - A year ago this month, Assemblywoman Susan Eggman, D-Stockton, was still settling into her seat in the Legislature.

She had just been named chairwoman of the Assembly Agriculture Committee and had introduced a farmland-preservation bill, AB823, hoping it would force a minimum mitigation standard for urban development projects statewide.

Her goal was to help clarify California Environmental Quality Act requirements, reinforcing the notion that every acre taken out of farmland production would be replaced by an acre preserved for that purpose.

The bill quickly made it onto the California Chamber of Commerce's annual "job killer" list. Opposition mounted.

Last month, AB823 died in Eggman's committee, but the former Stockton city councilwoman has come up with a new approach.

This week, she introduced AB1961, which also is intended to preserve agriculture. It is supported by the California Climate and Agriculture Network, which has offices in Sebastopol and Sacramento.

"The goal is moving forward to better protect farmland resources and how to have a conversation about that," said Jeanne Merrill, policy director for the network known as CalCAN.

There are major differences in the two bills.

"We recognize in AB1961 that land decisions really are made at the local level," Merrill said. "This bill creates local opportunities for all stakeholders to come together and put their focus on what is going to happen to farmland in the future."

The earlier legislation was designed to better implement the state's pre-existing environmental law.

"Very quickly, we had quite a bit of opposition from builders and other industry groups," Merrill said. "They were reticent to have the one-to-one requirement."

AB823 was known as the Farmland Protection Act. AB1961 is titled the Sustainable Farmland Strategy Act. As the title implies, it requires counties to implement a sustainable strategy to preserve ag land.

"The (act) acknowledges that California farmland is a finite resource that is critical for our economy and our food security," Eggman said in a prepared statement.

"This bill highlights the need to discuss at the local level how we can maintain our agricultural land for generations to come."

AB1961 requires that counties with significant farmland resources inventory their agriculturally zoned land, describe their goals and policies to retain that farmland, mitigate for its loss, and compile that data on their county government web sites.

San Joaquin County, with a record-breaking crop output totaling \$2.87 billion in 2012, is the seventh-ranked farm-production county in the state and the nation.

California ag production last year topped \$45 billion.

Over the past three decades, locally and statewide, thousands of farmland acres have been converted to non-agriculture uses.

Eggman said the Sustainable Farmland Strategy Act is intended to complement the state's Williamson Act, which provides tax incentives for landowners to keep their property in agriculture.

The bill is supported by the Washington, D.C.-based American Farmland Trust, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers based in Davis, and CalCAN.

"It requires county governments to have a clear direction when dealing with agland resources," Merrill said. "It is an opportunity for local stakeholders. For some counties, they will already have policies in the works. For others, this may be a chance to look back at old policies and update them."

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