

## GUEST OPINION: County needs to stand by its open space promises

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If New York's Central Park had given in to all the development proposals put forth by private interests over the years, the iconic public landscape would be covered over 17 times by buildings and roads. Similarly, if Sonoma County residents allow the Board of Supervisors to reverse an open space easement in Roblar Valley, taxpayers will lose the millions already spent to permanently preserve the county's natural beauty and heritage.



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If this violation happens, we can fold up the Open Space District and forget about the future of protecting the singular Sonoma landscape which the entire nation takes pride in.

The issue in question is whether the county will stand firm in defending the conservation easement on the Barella Ranch for which it paid \$2.3 million in 2004. Barella owned a 956-acre ranch located in the beautiful Roblar Valley west of Petaluma. He sold an Open Space easement for \$2.3 million to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District on 758 acres. He promptly divided the easement property and sold it to two adjoining land owners. Keeping 198 acres with homes and ranch buildings, Barella now seeks county permission to build a haul road across the protected land so he can proceed with a neighboring industrial development — a gravel quarry and processing plant.

The high price of this open space easement signifies the uniqueness of the land and underscores the importance of the legal contract to permanently prevent any uses that would impair the property's open space value.

This imperiled land is beautiful, offering classic open rolling grasslands with oak groves and willow-lined small creeks that drain into Americano Creek. This landscape with its protected agricultural land reflects the beauty and traditions of Sonoma County unlike any other. Its purchase was the cornerstone acquisition of the strategic plan by the Open Space District to protect the 4,000-acre dairy belt in undeveloped western Sonoma County.

There is also a serious issue of fiscal responsibility. Open space protection is increasingly under heavy scrutiny across the country from the IRS, state attorneys general and professional associations that monitor the field. Citizens and government regulators will not tolerate the expenditure of taxpayer funds that result in giveaways and in the erosion of the public trust.

In these times of severe cutbacks of essential services supported by tax revenues, the public cannot afford to squander funds on open space acquisitions if elected representatives feel free to subsequently alter contracts — especially those that may bring windfall profits to influence-peddling developers.

The open space easement contracts are made to last in perpetuity, the details of the contracts are very specific, and citizens pay a great deal for these property rights. If specific conditions are diminished within these easements, the protection of open space in Sonoma County will be permanently weakened.

The Board of Supervisors must refuse to weaken the contracts it enters into for the public good. Refusal to do so is a slippery slope from which it becomes impossible to recover the high ground. And since Sonoma County is a model for the state and nation, this case could set a far-reaching precedent weakening land conservation and threatening the proper use of taxpayer funds.

Please remind the supervisors that they should stand firm in protecting environmental protection in Sonoma County and the rights and expectations of its citizens.

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