

From: susan_bryant
To: Natasha@sblafco.org
Subject: Public comment for: May 8, 2025, Information Item 3) study session RICHARDS RANCH annexation
Date: Saturday, April 26, 2025 6:25:16 AM

Please forward the following public comments from me to the Commission. Thank you.

Dear Commissioners,

As an Orcutt resident who has followed this process since 2022 and will be directly affected, I hope this study/informational session will address the following issues.

First and most importantly, my neighborhood supports developing housing on this site.

If there is opposition it is to annexation.

Annexation will create disenfranchisement. Our working-class homes surround this parcel, this peninsula, on the north, east, and south which by the way the City of Santa Maria has shown no interest in annexing. This property will be immediately surrounded by our homes, a new County fire station, and an planned Orcutt community park/sports complex. This property, if annexed, will impact our County neighborhood and leave us with no voice in how the conceptual plans evolve and how they will then be developed in and by the City of Santa Maria.

The current map presented by LAFCO for this study session adds more than 10 acres to the final, City-approved EIR acreage (now including State Highway 135). I've been informed that the map boundaries needed to be expanded to eliminate the "island" of the original 44 acres in order to make it contiguous with the City so it can be annexed. After almost 3 years into this process, boundaries are now being drawn to accommodate this annexation that would otherwise not have been possible? Regardless of legality and perhaps my lack of experience with LAFCO, it simply engenders outsized mistrust for the process.

This "island" issue was raised in my email to the Commission for the 2023 study session. Wouldn't it have been reasonable for the City and the investors to openly address the boundary issue with the public prior to today?

Mr. Stoltey stated during his April 24, 2025, community meeting that LAFCO "wants" sites like this annexed into the city.

Could this study session clarify what positions have been taken by LAFCO? Have any other decisions been made between parties that are not public?

Second, Richards Ranch LLC investors have repeatedly referenced during their presentations the time and money they have spent during this process.

The EIR took longer than anticipated simply because the Orcutt community fully participated and submitted more constructive comments than expected.

The investors have leaned in to stress how much money they have spent. And, as much as Santa Maria City Planning Commissioners and some County officials have shown sympathy for this argument, it is not clear to me how guidelines address the cost of a process chosen by investors.

While Richards Ranch investors have been acknowledged through their time, money, and legal representation, concern for the time and effort of Orcutt residents like myself who will be heavily impacted by decisions made have often been overlooked.

Do investor's time and money spent factor into approving the annexation?

My third point is that the Walmart grant deed restrictions for this property appear to prohibit the development of the Richards Ranch commercial marketplace--a marketplace repeatedly promised to the Orcutt community. As Mr. Stoltey stated at LAFCO's first study session, a grocery on site is a "fantastic fit" for Orcutt. When asked at an Orcutt community meeting and again at the November 2024 City Council hearing he stated he had only verbal approval from Walmart for this marketplace. At Mr. Stoltey's April 24, 2025, community meeting he expanded that to become a "neighborhood commercial center" and confirmed having only a verbal understanding with Walmart. *(A copy of this grant deed was submitted by Orcutt resident Steve LeBard to the Santa Maria Planning Commission as well as to the Santa Maria City Council for their November 19 hearing.)*

Curiously, the City exercised its discretion to deny supplemental water to the County for a commercial marketplace that at the time appears to have been deed-wise prohibited. Denial of supplemental water has resulted in contention between all parties. Discussion during the November 5, 2024, County Board of Supervisors meeting clarified that the City has historically been guided by a competitive policy to deny Orcutt water in similar situations.

I can only assume that Mr. Stoltey has secured written permission from Walmart if this marketplace remains part of his proposed plans.

Also regarding commercial supplemental water issues on this site, if this annexation application is not approved Richards Ranch investors are proposing a backup 750-unit builder's remedy project *in the County*. This project appears to include commercial features.

Can this Commission determine if the City's supplemental water conditions/restrictions apply in the same manner to the builder's remedy project as they do to this project?

In any case, one might consider here how the City's decisions regarding water and even annexation were informed.

Fourth, regardless of whether you will discuss this site's designated monarch butterfly habitat, I'd like the record to show this summary of concern: Xerces Society's yearly sightings at this site have been documented over a long period of time. And, numbers have fluctuated precipitously in some years--especially this year--at this site as well as at Pismo and Goleta for reasons not known. Regardless of quantity, Xerces Society and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) have designated this as a Western Monarch Overwintering Site. Congressmen Carbajal and Panetta in particular have taken a very supportive view of the need to preserve and build monarch butterfly habitat.

Please note, the preferred alternative in the EIR provides for building housing while preserving habitat.

Fifth, all plans submitted by Richards Ranch LLC investors throughout this process have been "conceptual" and some statements made at meetings and hearings appear to be contradictory.

Will these conceptual plans become a gated community as originally proposed to the Orcutt community and during LAFCO's first study session (<https://www.richardsranchcommunity.com/>)? Or, is it intended as one City employee surprisingly volunteered at the City Council hearing that this annexation application is simply about "rezoning" and "affordable housing"? Even more confusing, will these conceptual plans become housing developed with preference "promised" to a Santa Maria employer (as stated at another City hearing)?

A developer who purchases this property will have to go through stages of specific plan submission, review, and approval whether through the City or the County. It is not clear how these conceptual plans will actually be developed.

Will this study session clarify this investor's intention and address inconsistencies?

Finally, when we in Orcutt first became involved with this annexation process in the spring of 2022, Executive Officer Prater was kind enough to arrange a Zoom tutorial for me and a few neighbors to explain LAFCO's process. One item I found in my notes is that **LAFCO can consider community sentiment**. A sentiment in this case of having no voice in a development next to our homes. This sentiment was reinforced for me listening to Santa Maria City Planning Commissioners literally blame current Orcutt for decades-old water decisions and even for not developing the site sooner (similarly repeated by Mr. Stoltey during his April 24, 2025, community meeting); watching the City's reluctance to work with County to resolve interagency issues; and, hearing Richards Ranch investors make inconsistent statements while moving this annexation forward. (<https://www.santamariasun.com/opinion/richards-ranch-annexation-is-not-an-even-playing-field-16038035>)

Is this study session the place to openly address these issues?

In summary, we have consistently asked Santa Maria City officials to see this project from a local community perspective--an Orcutt community which will be directly affected. City officials have been remiss in not doing that. And, at this point it appears those officials have not been able to lead all parties through issues that will only resurface in the future if not now resolved.

Sadly, Mr. Stoltey stated during his April 24, 2025, community meeting that he was "done with the County".

What are we in Orcutt, in the County, to take from that statement? What decisions have been made? Is there no longer any openness to keep this project within the County? No flexibility to work with our Orcutt community?

I sincerely hope this Commission provides clarity and unbiased direction.

Respectfully,

Susan Bryant
Orcutt resident