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## **Sonoma County Community Separators Backgrounder**

**From:** Teri Shore, Regional Director, North Bay, Greenbelt Alliance  
**Subject:** Protecting Greenbelts in Sonoma Valley with Community Separators  
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### **What are Community Separators?**

Community separators are lands designated by the County of Sonoma to serve as greenbelts between towns and cities to protect rural character, prevent sprawl and maintain community identity.

Next year, the voter-backed measures that keep the community separators in place expire. These voter-backed protections passed in 1996 with more than 70 percent of the countywide vote.

The county board of supervisors is developing a ballot measure to renew voter protections. Greenbelt Alliance and the conservation community is advocating for a ballot measure that goes beyond a renewal of the status quo to strengthen the policies and add priority greenbelt designations.

### **Community Separator Designations**

A total of eight areas totaling nearly 17,000 acres of county lands are designated as community separators in Sonoma County. They are companion measures to the urban growth boundaries in the cities, which set limits on the extent of urban development.

### **General Plan Policies and Zoning**

As defined in the Sonoma County General Plan, Community Separators are lands that “function as rural open space to separate cities and other communities, to contain urban development, and to provide city and community identity by providing visual relief from continuous urbanization.”

The 2020 General Plan of Sonoma County is the legal document on which all land use and planning decisions for county lands are based. The Community Separators policies are contained in the Land Use and Open Space elements of the General Plan. They are implemented through county zoning as an overlay to other land use designations. The overlay allows agricultural operations but generally prevents high density subdivision and commercialization of community separator lands beyond what is allowed by existing zoning.

### **Renewing and Updating Voter-backed Protections for Community Separators**

In October 2015, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors is starting the public process to develop a ballot measure to renew the community separators protections in November 2016. The supervisors

will need to decide whether to simply renew the 20-year-old community separators as is or take the opportunity to update the policies and boundaries to reflect current science and community interest.

### **Need to Renew and Update Community Separator Policies**

Greenbelt Alliance and the conservation community is urging the Board of Supervisors to renew and update the community separator policies and boundaries based on county priorities, science and community support.

#### **Priority Designations:**

The General Plan calls for priority community separator designations to be made in:

- Priority greenbelts near urban areas that are already identified and mapped by the Agriculture and Open Space Preservation District.
- Lands around Penngrove between Petaluma, Cotati and Rohnert Park.
- Lands between Cloverdale and Healdsburg

After more than 20 years, it is now time to consider these additions as well as other areas of important farm land and natural values.

Natural and Working Lands: Science and mapping conducted over the past 20 years shows that community separators have protected important natural resources such groundwater basins, farming and grazing lands, creeks and streams, native plants and trees and wildlife habitat. These natural values should be considered in the community separator renewal and updating.

#### **Actions Needed**

Advocacy: Organizations and individuals need to call on county supervisors for a work plan to renew and update community separators that considers policy improvements and additional designations for the 2016 ballot measure.

Science: Scientific organizations can provide mapping and critical information to help identify the natural values and other benefits of community separators and potential additional designations.

Community and Landowners: People and landowners in each Supervisorial District should come together to identify lands for designation where supported and not controversial.

Supervisors must direct the Permit and Resource Management Department to amend its proposed work plan to go beyond a simple renewal and removal of the sunset clause. The plan delays long overdue priority designations for years without any date certain for completion. Any actions after the ballot measure must contain a date certain for implementation.

Supervisors must begin the public process as soon as possible in order to:

1. Designate lands around Penngrove and Cloverdale
2. Designate lands identified as priority greenbelts by the Open Space District

3. Allow community separators between unincorporated communities, not just cities with Urban Growth Boundaries
4. Consider important areas for designation based on natural values and preservation of agriculture.

Supporting a robust renewal and updating of community separators will demonstrate the supervisors' and the county's commitment to long-term protections for greenbelts, ag lands and open space between our towns and cities.

There are Eight Community Separators totaling 17,000 acres in Sonoma County:

1. Petaluma/ Novato (2,755 acres)
2. Petaluma/ Rohnert Park (3,360 acres)
3. Rohnert Park/ Santa Rosa (1,650 acres)
4. Santa Rosa/ Sebastopol (1,400 acres)
5. Windsor/ Larkfield/ Santa Rosa (2,000 acres)
6. Windsor/ Healdsburg (1,200 acres)
7. Northeast Santa Rosa (3,300 acres)
8. Glen Ellen/ Agua Caliente (1,400 acres)