

**A Changing Landscape: California Forever's Mission to Uproot an Agricultural Tradition and Profiteer by Consuming the Open Space of Solano County**

**By: Aiden Dexter Mayhood  
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**The Mayhood Ranch house, built in 1902.**

## **A Changing Landscape: California Forever's Mission to Uproot an Agricultural Tradition and Profiteer by Consuming the Open Space of Solano County**

**By: Aiden Dexter Mayhood, 9/24/23**

### **The Workings of the Agricultural Industry of Eastern Solano County –**

The Mayhood Pioneers:

My 3<sup>rd</sup> great-grandfather, James Mayhood came to California in 1870, aged 19. He was a native of Napanee, Ontario, Canada. His first job in the West was hauling cobblestones that laid the foundation for the streets of San Francisco. In 1872, he moved to the Montezuma Hills, working as a sharecropper on the 640-acre Hall Ranch. A father of six, James and his wife Emma lived to see three of their six children die as infants or young adults. In 1891, James purchased 381 acres of land two miles outside of Rio Vista, adding an adjoining 100 acres of land in 1902. He built his dream house at the age of 52. His descendants added the Hall Ranch, Fink Ranch, William G. Joseph Ranch, and Lambie Ranch to their holdings in the Montezuma Hills, growing oats and grains and raising cattle and sheep. The Mayhood Ranch is celebrating its 132<sup>nd</sup> year of existence.



James Mayhood, left, and wife Emma (Copeley) Mayhood, right.

This is one of the many stories that describes the history and agricultural tradition of Rio Vista and Solano County. Agriculture has been, since the founding of our county to present day, a pillar and central part of Solano's identity. Our county's farmers and ranchers have balanced both the economic and environmental concerns of the county. They have acted as important stewards of our natural resources and cultivators of our food supply. They are both preservationists and businesspeople who cherish their ancestral history. Many members of the current generation are intent on carrying that tradition out.

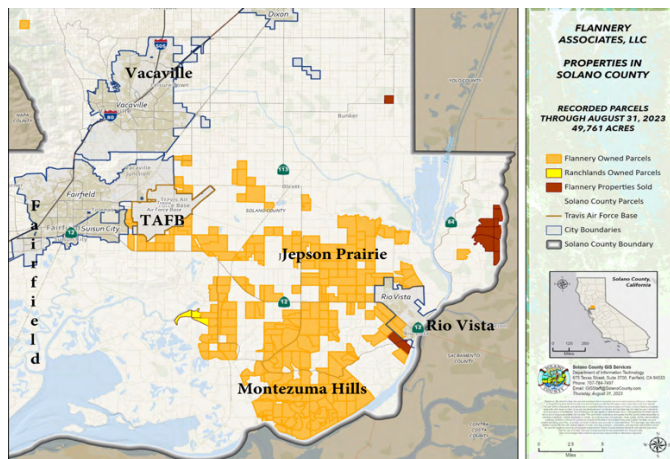
However, California Forever's (better known as Flannery Associates) purchase of Solano County farmland and ranchland has challenged the historical partnership of economic and environmental interests generational farmers in our communities have championed. Flannery's conversion of agricultural land to urban use will put increased pressure on adjacent landowners

to sell. Industries tied to Solano County agriculture will suffer as well. Agricultural equipment and supply dealers, trucking companies, and the only lamb slaughterhouse west of the Rocky Mountains may be adversely affected. Agricultural employees and their families are at risk.

Solano County farmers operate in a risky, year-by-year business environment. They invest their savings in inputs for crop production and livestock, yet seasonal weather conditions and global markets, both out of their control, largely determine commodity prices. One year, they might operate at a loss, and the next year, they may have earned enough to recuperate their losses from the year prior. Money is tight, and the ability to keep the family farm is always present on their mind.

Luckily, the establishment of the Montezuma Hills as a wind energy powerhouse, producing nearly 800 megawatts of energy annually, has subsidized farmers in rough economic times and allowed many to continue to operate. The revenue from the turbines goes towards property taxes and farm maintenance costs. These turbine leases expire between 2037 and 2057. Flannery's potential development of turbine land and surrounding parcels after the leases expire may drive out turbine operators. In that case, the valuable subsidy that has allowed farmers and ranchers in the Montezuma Hills to continue to operate would disappear. Without the turbines, land that remains in agricultural production in the Montezuma Hills will be threatened.

Flannery's holdings are principally within the Montezuma Hills, Jepson Prairie, and Elmira/Maine Prairie agricultural regions of Solano County. These are regions where almost all farmers rely on rainwater to hydrate their crops. The Montezuma Hills farmers operate on a dry crop rotation system; grains are grown without irrigation. Sheep and cattle graze on the land after harvest. Then, the fields are left to fallow, completing a three-year cycle. This process is not just beneficial for our economy and food supply but also for the environment. Unlike other agricultural regions in the county, no groundwater or irrigation is needed to feed the thirst of crops. Livestock feed on invasive weeds and fertilize the soil. Many farming operations here tout themselves as at least carbon neutral and even as carbon sequestrers.



Flannery's holdings as of August 31, 2023. Multiple sources have conflicting acreage totals for Flannery. This may be a result of ongoing litigation.



Flannery's plans for development come at a time where it has never been more urgent to protect our agricultural lands and open space in the county. Solano County's agricultural land and open space need strong advocates. Yet, at the May 2<sup>nd</sup> Solano County Board of Supervisors meeting, in a 3-2 vote, the board decided to remove the long-standing agricultural advisory committee. Supervisors Williams and Hannigan opposed the dissolution of the committee. Absent the committee's input to the supervisors, public involvement in support of agriculture and open space is needed more than ever.



Ernest Dexter Mayhood I, son of James Mayhood, leading a team of horses pulling a harvester.

### **Flannery Associates: The Investors and Counsel -**

The Kroutch Pioneers:

In 1876, my 4<sup>th</sup>-great grandparents, Jean Pierre Kroutsche (John P. Kroutch) and Johanna Francis, came with their six children to Rio Vista from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. In 1870, they had seen their homeland come under control of German states in the Franco-Prussian War. Johanna's father, Nicholas, had been a soldier in the Napoleonic Wars. Their two eldest sons, Nicholas Kroutch, my 3<sup>rd</sup>-great grandfather, and Francis "Frank" Kroutch, had longed to come to America. The family came together, refusing to be separated from their sons. Francis later died serving his country in World War I, succumbing to mustard gas in the trenches. The Kroutch family first established their 160-acre ranch near the intersection of Highway 12 and Highway 113, later selling it and establishing their 640-acre ranch off of Azevedo Road, closer to Rio Vista.





The Kroutch family, from left to right: Francis “Frank”, Jeanette Francis “Sister Scholastica”, Elizabeth “Sister Benedicta”, Johanna, Nicholas, Jean Pierre, Anna, and John.

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Flannery Associates LLC, in conjunction with Diversified Land LLC, Ranchlands LLC, and Flannery Holdings LLC, now owns 62,000 acres in Solano County. They have spent nearly \$1 billion, making them the largest private landowner in the county. Included in the 62,000 acres is approximately 500 acres within Rio Vista city limits and a vast majority of land surrounding Rio Vista’s city limits. Thanks to three unnamed sources, the New York Times reported that Flannery investors include billionaire venture capitalist Michael Moritz, Stripe founders Patrick and John Collison, entrepreneur Daniel Gross, technology investor Nat Friedman, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, venture capitalist Chris Dixon, Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of the late Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, and former Goldman Sachs trader Jan Sramek. Sramek, the founder and CEO of California Forever, is now a resident of Fairfield, California.

Billionaire investor and chairman of the San Francisco Standard, Michael Moritz, pitched to investors that the venture could lead to “financial gains that could be huge” and that the “return could be many times the initial investment” according to the New York Times. The venture would also “relieve some of the Silicon Valley pressures we all feel – rising home prices, homelessness, [and] congestion.” The behind the scenes claims by Flannery have made their ambitions clear. Their overt sales pitch on California Forever’s website is starkly different.

Despite the public sales pitch, one of Flannery's investors has fought against new housing developments within his own neighborhood. According to the British newspaper *The Independent*, in 2022 Marc Andreessen, a partner in Andreessen Horowitz and resident of Atherton near Menlo Park, "wrote to local officials...to oppose a zoning change that would allow for multi-family properties in some locations and build about 130 units of housing by 2031." He commented, "Please IMMEDIATELY REMOVE all multifamily overlay zoning projects from the Housing Element which will be submitted to the state in July. They will MASSIVELY decrease our home values, the quality of life of ourselves and our neighbors and IMMENSELY increase the noise pollution and traffic."

According to the *Hollywood Reporter* and *The Independent*, Andreessen owns a "Tuscan-style mansion" worth \$16.6 million and "two separate mega mansions in Malibu worth over \$200 million together." Ms. Arrillaga-Andreessen, Andreessen's wife, is also "the daughter of a billionaire Silicon Valley land developer." In a 2020 essay called "It's Time to Build", Andreessen claimed, "We can't build nearly enough housing in our cities with surging economic potential" while also opposing cheaper, multi-family housing within his own neighborhood.

In a poll sent to 1,400 Solano County residents, Flannery touted the idea of creating new homes, solar energy farms, orchards, an aqueduct, and 10,000 acres of "open space." This could be on land where treated sewage sludge, known as biosolids, has been applied. Some parcels have once housed animal testing facilities. Other Flannery parcels are adjacent to the IT Corporation hazardous waste facility that "accepted liquids, sludges and solid waste from oil and gas exploration and production activities." Additional land is adjacent to Travis Air Force Base, raising concerns about future base operational capabilities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) depictions of one to three new cities built from entirely "private sector money" on California Forever's website represent what looks more like a coastal Italian village rather than the low rolling hills of Jepson Prairie or the imposing Montezuma Hills. Thus far, Flannery has contracted with LS Power to build a substation on their property, received a proposal for battery storage from Clearway Energy Group, and received a proposal for a carbon sequestration project by Air Liquide. Flannery has made their own proposals to local government agencies in recent months as well.

Flannery has also contacted the city of Rio Vista's legal counsel to sign a waiver that would allow the law firm representing the city to also represent Flannery. The firm, Kronick, Moskowitz, Tiedemann and Girard (KMTG), was approached by Flannery to "arrange and document the availability of an adequate long-term water supply for one or more potential future mixed-use community development projects to be proposed in Solano County." This partnership could lead to "the potential for a future conflict of interest between California Forever's efforts to orchestrate water supplies and to obtain land-use approvals...and the potential for Rio Vista to oppose California Forever's efforts."



A depiction of a new Flannery city generated by artificial intelligence.

Flannery has also reached out to reclamation districts in the area. In 2020, Michelle Chester, a lawyer employed by Somach Simmons & Dunn focused on water rights, and “Super Lawyer” Richard Melnyk, both working for Flannery, opposed the service of Downey-Brand as legal counsel for the Little Egbert Joint Powers Agency. The Little Egbert Joint Powers Agency was established by two water reclamation districts to “optimize flood risk reduction, habitat, and agricultural economic benefits” outside of Rio Vista at the confluence of Cache Slough and the Yolo Bypass. In addition, the project would “re-establish a diverse open water, tidal marsh and riparian ecosystem complex to benefit threatened wildlife such as the Delta smelt, longfin smelt, green sturgeon, Chinook salmon, and giant garter snake.” Downey-Brand has historically served local farmers and ranchers in the area, representing “over 30 reclamation, levee, water, and irrigation districts and mutual water companies in the Sacramento Valley.”

### **Suing Landowners and Tearing Apart Families –**

The Hagan Pioneers:

My 3<sup>rd</sup>-great grandparents, Patrick Hagan and Maria McNamee, came to Solano County from Maghara, Northern Ireland sometime in the 1860s. They settled in the once bustling town of Denverton, formerly known as Nurse’s Slough. Later, they established a 160-acre ranch near the intersection of Highway 12 and Highway 113. Patrick and Maria raised their seven children on the ranch. As the Hagan family grew and the ranching operations expanded, a larger house was needed for their family. The Hagan’s moved and attached two separate pioneer homes to their existing residence, creating one house. This unique combination of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century structures kept intact the residences of early pioneers while also serving the needs of their expanding family. Hagan descendants over time purchased various neighboring ranches, at one point totaling 3300 acres.





Members of the Hagan family sit within a horse-drawn harvester sometime during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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In May of this year, Flannery sued a group of Solano County landowners for \$510 million in Flannery Associates LLC v. Barnes Family Ranch et al. This further expanded pain and suffering for more families in the area. Flannery claims to have "direct 'smoking gun' evidence of a price-fixing conspiracy", costing them at least \$170 million. Flannery is further involved in separate litigation in Gassy Lassy LP v. Barnes Family Ranch et al.

Flannery claims that, through various emails and text messages found in these separate litigations, landowning "conspirators" worked together to determine at the price they would sell their land to Flannery. Flannery claims that "[c]onspirators attempt to gather sympathy and obfuscate their illegal conduct by calling themselves 'farmers'", a huge insult to the profession and to families sued that have farmed in the area since the 1800s. Flannery claims that this "conspiracy" has prevented other local landowners from selling their properties to Flannery and that their actions were "poisoning the well." They also accuse the "conspirators" of preventing Flannery from "play[ing] owners against owners."

Flannery's lawsuit asserts that landowners violated the Sherman Act, the Cartwright Act, and the Unfair Competition Law. Before Flannery began purchasing land in Solano County, fair market values for the land ranged between \$1,500 to \$4,000 per acre. Despite their assertions,

Flannery continues to offer upwards of \$20,000 per acre to landowners and as much as around \$50,000 per acre for industrial property located on Lambie Road.

Suing under anti-monopoly laws, Flannery admits that they are “not only the largest, but also the *de facto* only, purchaser of properties” in eastern Solano County. This market condition actually reflects a monopsony. This means Flannery is the only buyer with demand for the property, giving them sole control of the price of the land. Flannery claims to have suffered damages by overpaying for property purchased, to have lost profits by not being able to purchase land landowners refuse to sell, to have overpaid for property purchased from parties influenced by the “conspirators”, and to have lost profits from not being able to purchase land from landowners influenced by the “conspirators.” Despite this claim, Flannery continues to raise the prices of their offers.

Flannery, as the only price-setter in eastern Solano County land, is now facing challenges as a result of their secrecy and their lawsuits. Many landowners are certainly not interested in selling their land, even for offers that are “at a substantial premium to fair market values.” Flannery blames defendants in the lawsuit for artificially inflating land prices, yet they continued to purchase the land. In the lawsuit, they claim their inability to have a monopoly over price-setting rendered them unable to build a more “contiguous assembled property” that is more valuable for their investors.

In response, attorneys for the landowners sued by Flannery claim that the defendants “may have had myriad other non-economic reasons for their decision not to sell their land: the lack of transparency regarding who or what Flannery is and its intentions deterred sales or warranted a premium; Flannery’s own aggressive tactics indicating the land is more valuable than previously thought so Defendants negotiated accordingly; and the present high-profile litigation, itself, could deter landowners from engaging with Flannery or else risk a lawsuit.” They claim Flannery’s lawsuit is “a ham-fisted intimidation tactic designed to impose massively expensive and invasive litigation to punish those farmers that already sold to Flannery and/or to force those farmers who prefer to continue to farm to sell to Flannery.” This sentiment is echoed by Congressman John Garamendi. Some families have settled, no doubt because of the cost of litigation, while others have remained in the fight. The pain that these families feel is palpable in our community.

### **Solano County’s Existing Infrastructure to Protect Open Space and Agricultural Land –**

The Butler Pioneers:

My 4<sup>th</sup> great grandfather, Newton Cannon “N.C.” Butler, came to California in 1850 from Iowa. He traveled across America via ox teams and a prairie schooner. N.C. Butler was a miner along the Feather River for some time, where he married his wife Pauline Barker. Shortly after, N.C. sought out the life of a farmer and came to Solano County in the late 1850s. He first farmed in the Suisun Valley and then established a 320-acre ranch on what is now Robinson Road near Rio Vista. He experimented with various crops and was one of a few ranchers to raise a successful flaxseed crop in 1879. Together, N.C. and Pauline had six children, including my 3<sup>rd</sup>-great

grandfather Arthur Wood "A.W." Butler, a farmer in the Sacramento Delta on Grand Island and Merritt Island. N.C. Butler served as postmaster for Rio Vista until his death in 1896.



Here pose two of the some of the earliest settlers of eastern Solano County, N.C. Butler and wife Pauline Barker.

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The Solano County General Plan, adopted by both the Solano County Board of Supervisors and voters in 2008, serves to protect the county's agricultural lands. It states, "Protecting agricultural lands and the county's rural character has been an overarching theme of the County's planning efforts for many decades." Measure A was passed by Solano County voters in 1984, imposing "strict limitations on the County Board of Supervisor's ability to allow new residential, commercial, or industrial development in agricultural and open-space areas."

The plan also established a policy to "encourage a development pattern that first seeks to maintain existing communities, second to develop vacant lands within existing communities presently served by public services, and third to develop lands immediately adjacent to existing communities where services can easily be provided." The Orderly Growth Initiative (OGI) in 1994 extended Measure A, which was set to expire in 1995, through the end of 2010. In 2007, the policy was updated, extending the Orderly Growth Initiative until 2028. These measures all passed with overwhelming community support.



The county's agricultural lands have separated the unique and distinct borders of our county's cities. Future development outside of the sphere of influence risks urban sprawl and the merging of distinct Solano communities. Thus, the county through its general plan follows the mantra, "What is urban shall be municipal." However, there is a way to circumvent the Orderly Growth Initiative. In order to incorporate a new city in unincorporated areas of Solano County, a majority of voters within the county must approve it at the ballot box. Flannery is now organizing to put an initiative to do just that on the 2024 ballot. However, any plans to incorporate in unincorporated areas, if approved by voters, will then have to be approved by Solano County's Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

The LAFCO board consists of representatives of the Solano County Board of Supervisors, representatives of cities within the county, and a member of the public. Currently, Solano County's LAFCO consists of Supervisors Vazquez and Mashburn, Mayors Kott of Rio Vista and Bird of Dixon, and Nancy Shopay, executive officer of the Solano Association of Realtors. LAFCOs are governed by the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000. Solano County's LAFCO must observe four purposes by law. First, it must discourage urban sprawl. Second, it must preserve open space and prime agricultural land. Third, it must provide efficient government services. Finally, it must encourage orderly growth boundaries based upon local conditions and circumstances.

The Solano Land Trust, formed in 1986, has protected over 25,000 acres within Solano County's borders permanently from development, such as Rush Ranch, Lynch Canyon, and Jepson Prairie. In 1997, the Solano Land Trust outright purchased Jepson Prairie, described as "the premier – and one of the few remaining – vernal pool habitats and native bunchgrass prairies in California."

Jepson Prairie houses vernal pools and playa lakes, which support threatened and endangered native wildlife, such as fairy shrimp, California tiger salamanders, and the Delta green ground beetle "known only from the 10 square-mile area surrounding the preserve." The preserve also hosts 15 rare and endangered plant species. Several Flannery parcels surround both the Jepson Prairie and the neighboring Wilcox Ranch, a ranch that sold development rights and conservation easements to the Solano Land Trust. Local ranchers use their livestock to rid the area of invasive dangerous to the local ecosystem.

Local farmers Jeanne McCormack and Al Medvitz became partners of the Solano Land Trust through conservation easements and selling the development rights of their property to the trust. This allows their 3700-acre Perry Anderson Ranch and McCormack Ranch in the Montezuma Hills to continue to be used for agricultural purposes. However, non-farm development on the land inconsistent with agriculture is limited, preserving visual open space for the residents of Solano County, maintaining agriculture as a pillar of Solano County's economy, and safeguarding "the heritage and character of Solano County." Flannery owns several parcels bordering McCormack's and Medvitz's property.



A rainbow crests over the ranch of Medvitz and McCormack in the Montezuma Hills (photographed by Kelsey Nichols).

### **Plan Bay Area 2050, Not 1970 -**

The McIntyre Pioneers:

My 4<sup>th</sup>-great grandparents, George Washington “G.W.” McIntyre and Martha Emeline “Emma” Bodenhamer, hailed from Virginia and Illinois respectively. G.W. came to California in 1852, settling on Brannan Island in the Sacramento Delta and becoming one of the island’s first pioneers. Farming in the Delta at the time was risky business, with threats of catastrophic floods yearly. That is perhaps why G.W. purchased 160 acres of land on Robinson Road near Rio Vista sometime in the 1860s, an area less prone to flooding. Together, G.W. and Emma had five children, but Emma sadly passed at the age of 37. Later in life, G.W. took his chances on the Sacramento Delta again, purchasing land on Grand Island on what is now called McIntyre Point.



The short-lived Emma Bodenhamer, a pioneer who would only live to the age of 37.

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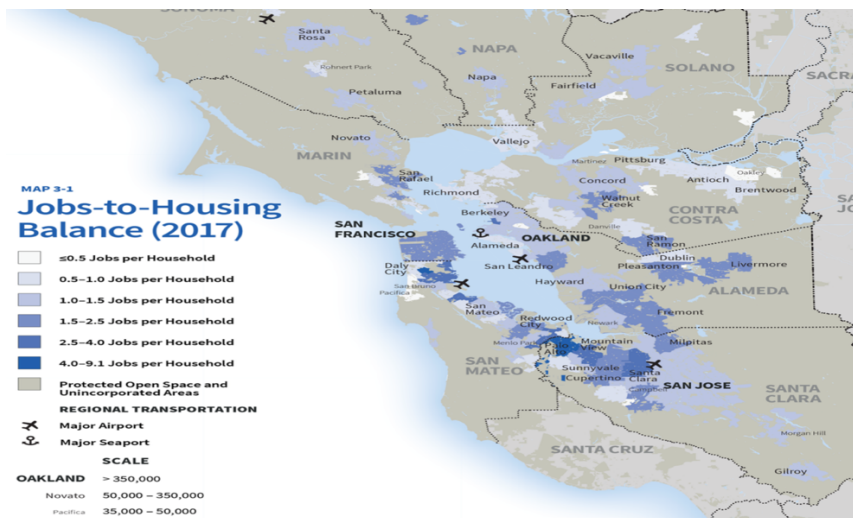
day, a pillar and central part of Solano's identity. Our county's farmers and ranchers have balanced both the economic and environmental concerns of the county. They have acted as important stewards of our natural resources and cultivators of our food supply. They are both preservationists and businesspeople who cherish their ancestral history. Many members of the current generation are intent on carrying that out. Plan Bay Area 2050 offers a vision that can make that possible.

Flannery Associates claims that their plan to develop eastern Solano County has historic precedent. They cite the Association of Bay Area Governments Regional Plan 1970-1990 as concluding that "to keep our region affordable, prosperous, and balanced, new industries and communities could be built in eastern Solano." However, this regional plan cited by Flannery is outdated and no longer viable. The updated plan, Plan Bay Area 2050, adopted by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) in 2021, offers a new vision that every Bay Area county has agreed on. This plan is built on five principles: affordability, connectivity, diversity, health, and vibrancy.

Strategy EN4 of the plan advises that counties should "maintain urban growth boundaries." It states that counties should be "using urban growth boundaries and other existing environmental protections [and] focus new development within the existing urban footprint...as established by local jurisdictions." This will limit urban sprawl, lower the cost of providing essential government services, and protect open space. These goals coincide perfectly with the goals of the Orderly Growth Initiative and the Solano County General Plan.

In addition, rather than focus on building more homes in Solano County, the plan suggests that the Bay Area should "shift the location of jobs." This is because "San Francisco and Silicon Valley have many more jobs than homes, and many communities in the East Bay see residents commuting across the bay each day to reach their jobs." Communities in the Bay Area need to adopt strategies to "shift housing to areas with high concentrations of jobs and shift jobs to areas with high concentrations of housing." What this tells us is that Solano County is in need of permanent jobs much more than it is in need of for-profit development of housing tracts in unincorporated regions.





Solano County lacks jobs, rather than housing according to this ABAG depiction.

Plan Bay Area 2050 describes what they call Priority Production Areas (PPAs), which are “locally identified places that are prime opportunity sites for job growth in middle-wage sectors like manufacturing or logistics.” The plan claims that “the majority [of PPAs] are concentrated in the North Bay and East Bay, where housing is plentiful but job opportunities are more limited. PPAs provide opportunity sites to grow jobs where people already live, benefitting the region’s overall jobs-to-housing balance, particularly for workers in middle-wage industries.” No region within Flannery’s holdings constitutes a priority development area for new housing.



Plan Bay Area indicates that no areas where Flannery Associates owns land are priority development areas for housing.

Based on Plan Bay Area 2050, it is clear that Flannery should spend their resources on developing industry and jobs within the existing urban borders of Solano County’s cities. In addition, Flannery investors in Silicon Valley should focus their efforts on developing more affordable housing “by promoting more dense growth near transit” within their own communities. Flannery relies on the Bay Area’s Regional Plan 1970-1990, issued in 1970, as a

justification for large developments in eastern Solano County. Flannery needs to look to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and strategize any development based on Plan Bay Area 2050, adopted by all 9 counties within the Bay Area in 2021.

California Forever concludes on its website with a message: “California was built on its pioneering spirit, its boundless optimism, and the steadfast conviction that if we work hard, and together, that our best days still lie ahead, waiting to be built, for our children, and their children, and for all the generations to come. California Forever is committed to building a place that embodies these ideals. Join us.”

Many citizens of Solano County, like me, are skeptical about Flannery’s vision of Solano County. Flannery’s secret plans failed to include consultations with local government officials. Flannery has demonstrated disregard for historical community dynamics and traditions. Flannery’s plans circumvent the Orderly Growth Initiative with assistance of millions of dollars of financial backing to use at the ballot box. Flannery’s use of “mobster tactics” against landowners through expensive litigation continues to cause great pain in the farming community. Flannery’s inattention of Plan Bay Area 2050 are the marks of a path full of missteps.

I urge anyone who reads this to oppose any attempts to incorporate new cities in unincorporated areas of Solano County. Development within Solano County must be done within current city limits or directly adjacent to them through city annexations. Our communities and their leaders must lead the way, not Silicon Valley billionaires calling the shots. Solano County’s agricultural heritage and industry must be preserved. Their historic investment in our communities are a key piece of future public policy. We must support development of new industries and permanent job-creating activities within the cities of Vallejo, Benicia, Fairfield, Suisun City, Vacaville, Dixon, and Rio Vista, not outside of them. Fight billionaire pet projects and instead encourage local solutions. If we all work hard to achieve these ends, Solano County’s best days are ahead of us.

**Author:**

Aiden Dexter Mayhood is a 7<sup>th</sup>-generation resident of the city of Rio Vista. He graduated from UCLA with highest departmental honors in June 2023, double majoring in Political Science and Economics and minoring in Accounting.