

## LODE RANCH OK'D FOR AG PRESERVE

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December 18, 2011  
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SAN ANDREAS - A rare request to place a 100-acre ranch near San Andreas into an agricultural preserve sparked debate last week within the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors.

Supervisor Darren Spellman believes allowing rancher Tammy Ham to get a tax break in exchange for preserving her ranch as open space places an unfair burden on other taxpayers.

Spellman's colleagues argue that such tax breaks are a way to shield ranchers from pressure to take their land out of food production.

California law allows farmers and ranchers to place their land into agricultural preserves through Williamson Act contracts. The owner promises not to convert the land to housing or other urban use for at least 10 years and in return gets a tax break.

The law has been around for decades, but in the past few years in Calaveras County, it has been rare for a property owner to start a new Williamson Act contract.

At one time, California state government paid counties for the money they lost through granting Williamson Act property tax breaks. That has ended the past two years, however, as California's state budget shrank.

"We're getting no money from the state," Spellman said at a meeting Tuesday.

Board Chairman Tom Tryon defended the contracts as a proven way to prevent rural sprawl.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky said that California has already paved over far too much fertile land. "This country ... still needs to feed itself somehow," Wilensky said.

The final vote to approve the contract was 4-1, with Spellman opposed.

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