



Our Urgent Need to Protect Opportunities for Urban Agriculture Within
the City of Boise

Position Statement

May 21, 2018

North West Neighborhood Association



Dear Community Leaders,

Last winter our neighborhood learned of plans to develop much of the largest contiguous farmland remaining in Boise. This land had been under agricultural use for at least 100 years until last year, when the lease was raised dramatically on the current farmer and plans were made to rezone for much higher density development than the current 2.1 units per acre (R-1A). This caught the neighborhood by surprise, as the landowners had stated just two years earlier in a letter opposing annexation by the city that they planned on continuing farming their land into the indefinite future.

This area forms a substantial portion of the last contiguous foothills to farmland connection in all of Boise. It is on highly fertile six foot deep topsoils formed by millennia of flood deposition by the Boise River--the old northern channel of the river forms the southern border of this land by what is now the Spoils Bank Canal, a year-round water source for waterfowl and other wildlife, including a mule deer herd that inhabits the thousand acre natural buffer area of the Ada County Landfill. Furthermore, this landscape forms the context for Dry Creek Cemetery, established in 1865, as well as the Idaho Veterans Cemetery that raises our flag above the western extent of the foothills. The northern route of the Oregon Trail, known as the Goodale's cutoff, wends its way along between the foothills and this farmland -- indeed, wagon ruts may still be visible here where the context of the Trail is more reminiscent of those pioneering days than points in the city farther east. Today Old Hill Road and Hill Road Parkway is a popular walking and cycling route in Boise known for its rural charm, wildlife, and tranquility.

Our North West Neighborhood Association is circulating a petition requesting that Boise maintain the zoning on these parcels along Hill Road Parkway. In talking to other neighborhoods, however, we have realized that our local struggle is part of a larger need for a comprehensive solution to the loss of farm and agricultural lands and their associated open spaces, ecological services, and community benefits within Boise, as well as greater transparency and inclusiveness within the regulatory process that leads to their development. In response, we have created a position statement: Our Urgent Need to Protect Opportunities for Urban Agriculture Within the City of Boise. We hope that your neighborhood association will support this statement, and with it, our attempt to shape the rapidly changing landscape of our area in a way that future generations will look back on our efforts with pride and gratitude. Time is of the essence.

We are sincerely grateful for your consideration of this position statement,

The North West Neighborhood Association of Boise

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One of Boise's stated goals is to preserve opportunities for small-scale agriculture^{1,2}. In 2012, the city started making changes to our zoning ordinances to support 'urban farms' by increasing the allowed density of small animals and establishing rules that clarified and supported agricultural practices³. However, as Boise grows and builds more dense development, we are at risk of losing the needed local land base for raising food. This loss is especially apparent in neighborhoods on the city edges where traditional farmlands are being converted to housing⁴.

In order to preserve opportunities for agriculture within the city, we respectfully ask that Boise maintain existing zoning on land with established agricultural use, or significant agricultural potential such as productive soils and access to our historical investment in gravity-fed irrigation⁵, until a comprehensive solution can be implemented (see action plan, page 6). While we recognize that maintaining zoning will not directly prevent the loss of farm and agricultural lands, it is a legally defensible⁶ strategy to support traditional agriculture uses⁷ by providing transitions⁸ between higher densities and existing open spaces, and by preserving the potential for small-scale agriculture on larger lots.

This request is not intended as a judgement on density as a planning tool. However, without the successful implementation of a regional plan to protect traditional agricultural lands⁹, we, as a city, urgently need to make land use decisions that protect remaining farmland and their associated open spaces where we can--within Boise city limits.

Endnotes

1. Boise's Comprehensive Plan emphasizes the need to 'Preserve Opportunities for Urban Agriculture', stating that "As the city continues to grow, opportunities for small-scale urban agriculture will be preserved and residential food production encouraged. Providing opportunities for community gardens, small-scale farms, and other food production within the AOCI will help reduce the community's reliance on outside food sources, support the local economy, promote community interaction, increase access to fresh produce, promote community health, and help Boise City maintain an identity that is distinct from other communities." Boise Blueprint; Chapter 3, Citywide vision and policies: Environmental Stewardship. Page 2-18. Retrieved from https://pds.cityofboise.org/media/151839/bb_chapter_2_04032017.pdf

2. Boise's Comprehensive Plan, in describing the NW Boise planning area, describes "Development Constraints: There are remnant pastures in the Northwest planning area that could be preserved for their small scale urban agricultural characteristics.", page NW-2. Additionally: "NW-NC 1.3: URBAN AGRICULTURAL LANDS: Support the retention of urban agricultural lands and activities in the Northwest." The Southwest planning area has similar language. Boise Blueprint; Chapter 4, Northwest Planning Area. Retrieved from https://pds.cityofboise.org/media/151899/bb_chapter_4_northwest_02082017.pdf

3. "One of the fundamental themes of Blueprint Boise is environmental stewardship and one of the guiding principles is to preserve opportunities for urban agriculture," said Cody Riddle, Boise Planner at a Planning and Zoning hearing on February 6, 2012 when describing the rationale behind zoning code changes to support Urban Farms (ZOA11-00006). Mr. Riddle continued, "We do recognize this is probably the first step in what needs to be a larger process. The Committee discussed the importance of simply going beyond removing these barriers. We could look at providing actual incentives, whether it be in our subdivision ordinance or planned development ordinance, where gardening and things like this are encouraged. I think that will be an important follow-up." We are not aware that such a follow up has taken place. Retrieved from <http://pdsonline.cityofboise.org/pdsonline/Documents.aspx?id=201201241510598660>

4. Ada County witnessed a 36% loss of acres farmed and a 13% loss of agriculture operations over the ten years between 2002 and 2012. Hubbard, Monica, Ph.D. (Nov. 6, 2017), *Farm Land Conversion in the American West*, The Blue Review. Retrieved from <https://thebluereview.org/farm-land-conversion-american-west/>

5. "Building the complex system of irrigation canals to bring water to thousands of acres of farmland in Boise Valley was an epic achievement that took most of a century." Hart, Arthur. (Nov. 25, 2017), *Boise's vast irrigation network took time, money, expertise*,

Idaho Statesman. Retrieved from

<http://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/article186461278.html>

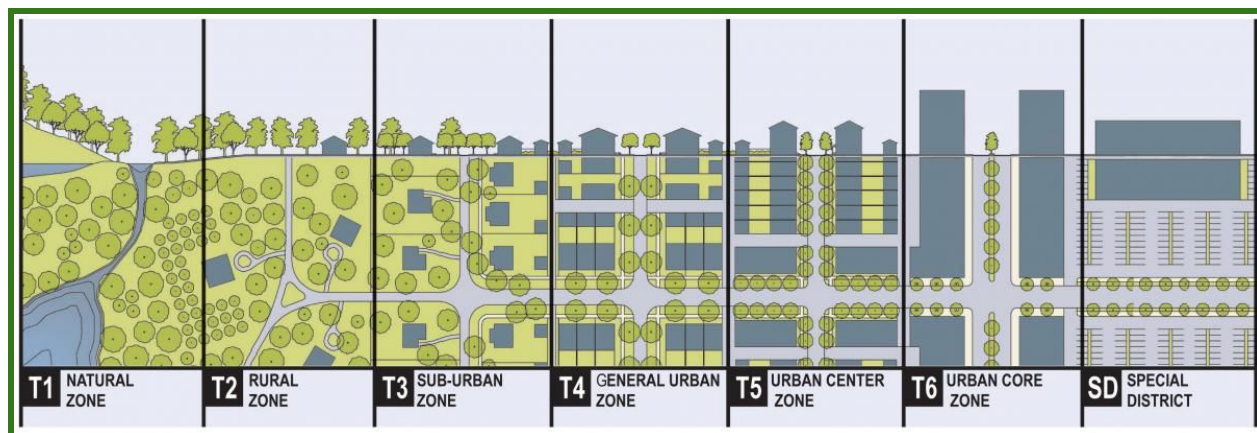
6. The Idaho Supreme Court has upheld the power of cities to deny requests for rezoning despite consistency with a comprehensive plan, as two separate cases confirm: “In Bone and Balser, a developer sought an up-zone that was consistent with the comprehensive plan, and the county’s decision to deny the upzone was affirmed. In other words, the Court said that the county was not required to accede to an upzone just because it was requested new use was expressly contemplated for that are in the comprehensive plan.” Allen, Gary et al. (2018) Land Use HandBook, Givens Pursley, pages 36-37. Retrieved from

<http://www.givenspursley.com/assets/publications/handbooks/handbook-landuse.pdf>

7. Vince Matthews, Idaho state statistician for the USDA, described what is also known as the ‘development domino effect’ for Boise Weekly: “He said unlike neighboring counties where agriculture is thriving, Ada County is particularly susceptible to pressures that diminish farming... For Matthews, subdivisions in places like Boise, Meridian and Kuna have reduced connectivity between farms and unleashed economic forces that have caused them to cede ground—literally. ‘It starts a downward path because the more houses that are closer to farmland, the harder it is to farm that remaining land, and farmers start making decisions about whether they’re going to farm their land or sell it so someone can build houses,’ he said.” Berry, Harrison. (December 21, 2016). *How Agriculture in Ada County is Being Edged Off the Map*, Boise Weekly. Retrieved from

<https://www.boiseweekly.com/boise/how-agriculture-in-ada-county-is-being-edged-off-the-map/Content?oid=3949895>

8.



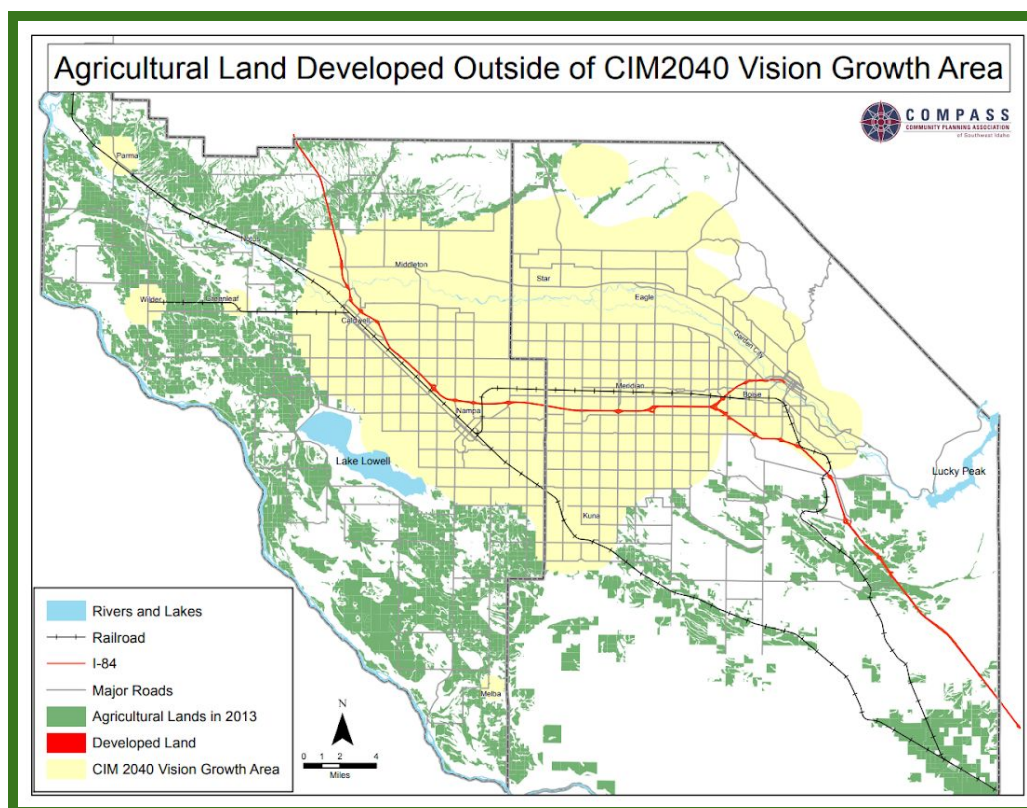
The Rural-to-Urban Transect is a planning tool for organizing a symbiotic continuum between the natural and built environments. For NW Boise, the foothills establish a natural zone (T1), Hill Road area a Rural Zone (T2) extending to a Sub-Urban Zone (T3). The core of the Transit Oriented Development Nodes (eg Gary and State,

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Horseshoe Bend and State) would form the General Urban Zone (T4). Applying the transect would help prevent the 'development domino effect' by emphasizing the value of multiple land use types in a way that is naturally 'immersive' rather than homogenized and dull. Steuteville, Robert. (April 13, 2017). *Great Idea: the rural-to-urban transect*. Public Square. Retrieved from <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2017/04/13/great-idea-rural-urban-transect>

9.



The regional planning body for Ada and Canyon Counties (COMPASS) does not envision future agriculture on traditional lands along the prime soils of the upper Boise River floodplain; rather, it plans for farmland to be pushed to the farthest edges of development west of Caldwell in 2040. Retrieved from http://www.compassidaho.org/documents/prodserv/pmr/Farmland_Preservation.pdf

DRAFT ACTION PLAN TO PRESERVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE

The goal of this action plan is to provide a framework for a city-wide solution to the loss of the lands needed for future urban agriculture within Boise. Until this plan can be implemented through a transparent and inclusive process, we ask that existing zoning is maintained on lands with established agricultural use or significant agricultural potential as expressed in our position statement.

We recommend these steps to achieve each neighborhood's goal:

- 1) Maintain zoning on areas of significant agricultural potential until the following is completed:
 - a) Identify areas of potential agricultural value within city boundaries and the Area of Impact that meet three or more of the following criteria:
 - i) have traditional agricultural use
 - ii) have productive soils as recorded by the USDA soil survey
 - iii) have access to gravity fed irrigation infrastructure
 - iv) have significant wildlife habitat, including that of pollinators
 - v) contribute to enhancing recreational and/or aesthetic value
 - vi) have significant historical, ecological, or landscape value
 - vii) form large contiguous blocks of undeveloped land
 - viii) form the urban-wildlands interface
 - b) Recognize these areas as inherently valuable in their current state for their contribution to the city.
 - c) Implement planning policy that encourages retaining these parcels as natural and agricultural areas by incorporating the Rural-to-Urban Transect¹ as a high priority planning tool in the surrounding region.
 - d) Amend the comprehensive plan to reflect the priority placed on preserving agricultural land as expressed above. Amend the land use map to reflect the broad geographic distribution of these areas.
 - e) Select parcels from a) above, with priority given to those that meet a greater number of criteria. Begin work to incorporate selected parcels as permanent agricultural and natural areas by facilitating agricultural

¹ The Rural-to-Urban Transect is a planning tool that emphasizes the orderly progression from the natural to built environments. Retrieved from <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2017/04/13/great-idea-rural-urban-transect>

easements, transfers of development rights, purchase by trusts, etc. in order to protect and preserve agricultural open space and the many benefits it contributes to the community.

- i) Work with neighborhoods to specify a goal for total acreage protected within each neighborhood association boundary in which these lands with agricultural potential remain.
 - ii) Predict a reasonable success rate for establishing permanent protection for the potential of agricultural use
 - iii) For each neighborhood, choose an adequate number of parcels that will conservatively meet the goal of acreage protected considering the predicted success rate
- 2) After the above steps are completed, evaluate the ongoing success of establishing permanent protection for lands of agricultural protection. Adjust the success rate and add or remove parcels from the list of those selected for protection so that the expected acreage will meet the goal for each neighborhood.
- 3) After the evaluation and adjustments are completed in 2) above, consider allowing zoning changes that could increase density on the areas identified by 1a) above that are not selected for permanent agricultural and natural open space. As these lands are developed, they should be changed in a way that recognizes and enhances their agricultural heritage and provides a transition between more intensely developed urban cores and semi-rural farm-and-wildlands.
- a) Strongly encourage development to maintain, encourage, and enhance an agricultural identity, aesthetic, and the associated ecological services:
 - i) Maintain open irrigation canals, laterals, and ditches²
 - ii) Maintain or create open fencing that provides the traditional fallow farmland habitat for pollinators, birds, and small animals
 - iii) Encourage the granting of public pathways along these irrigation corridors and fence lines that retain traditional uses of the fallow edges of agricultural land such as asparagus harvesting and observing wildlife
 - iv) Encourage the use of natural materials in visible areas of buildings

² Boise's State Street Corridor plan emphasizes the importance of retaining canals above ground for place-making: "The canal system, particularly north of State Street is another natural amenity and attractor for node development. Canals should be day-lighted and nodes designed to integrate spring/summer irrigation flow and non-flow periods. Walking paths and trails should be preserved adjacent to canals." State Street Corridor Transit Oriented Development Policy Guidelines, Section 3.3.2, page 23. Retrieved from https://pds.cityofboise.org/media/127913/1_StateStreetTODPolicies.pdf

- v) Give a higher priority to development plans that either a) incorporate large open spaces, especially on areas with productive soils, either as community garden or urban farms, or natural spaces that might be later converted to agriculture; or b) provide large lots with extensive yards that may allow for significant food production in the form of small scale urban agriculture.
 - vi) Discourage creating non-agricultural open spaces that are maintained as lawn or left as disturbed sites vulnerable to invasive plants: these areas require restoration toward a more sustainable ecological state that supports pollinator and wildlife habitat, as well as a context-sensitive aesthetic, by incorporating plants native to our region and micro-climates.
- 4) Evaluate the success of the process within each neighborhood and update the probabilities of achieving permanent protection. Iterate over the above steps in a transparent and open process until the target acreages are incorporated as lands retained for their potential for contributing to urban agriculture.