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# Contra Costa's anti-sprawl boundary draws fire as housing pressures grow



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PUBLISHED: May 4, 2026 at 4:30 AM PDT | UPDATED: May 4, 2026 at 4:54 PM PDT

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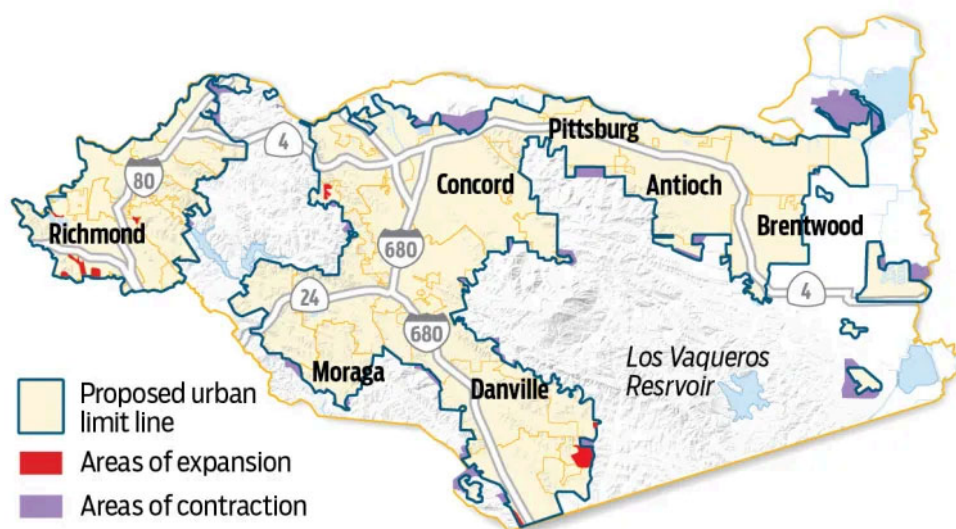
MARTINEZ — A decades-old anti-sprawl policy in Contra Costa County is drawing new opposition as critics argue extending it could worsen the region's housing shortage.

Since 1990, [a voter-approved boundary meant to prevent suburban sprawl](#) and protect open space has been on the books. The goal has been to maintain a 65/35 land preservation standard, with only 35% of county land used for urban development.

By preventing sprawl and focusing development near existing infrastructure and services, the county could prevent what it calls an “inefficient use of land” that would add to greenhouse gas emissions and pollution.

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“Protecting Contra Costa County’s open space and agricultural lands, discouraging urban sprawl, and reducing future traffic congestion, are issues that matter to County residents,” supervisors said in the ballot argument in favor of Measure A.



Source: Contra Costa County

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Measure A would renew the 2006 county line with some minor changes primarily to account for existing development restrictions on public property and constraints such as steep hillsides and high fire danger.

In addition to all five county supervisors, Measure A supporters include the [Greenbelt Alliance](#) and [Save Mount Diablo](#), both environmental advocacy groups; Rep. Mark DeSaulnier, who represents much of Contra Costa County at the federal level; and the [East Bay Leadership Council](#), a business-centered policy advocacy group.

Zoe Siegel, director of Climate Resilience at Greenbelt Alliance, said the county’s Urban Limit Line has largely been noncontroversial. Over its 36-year lifespan, it’s been adjusted six times with little opposition.

The Greenbelt Alliance, Sierra Club, California Association of Family Farmers and Mount Diablo Audubon Society did oppose the original Urban Limit Line ballot measure in 1990, but that was because they preferred an alternative measure also on the ballot that year they felt went beyond what the county was aiming to do.

Today, Siegel said Greenbelt Alliance feels comfortable with the lines proposed under Measure A, which she said will encourage housing growth in

“Greenbelt Alliance has been following the Urban Limit Line since before it was even a measure, working with the county to ensure the lines being drawn are protecting open spaces and encouraging growth in the right places,” Siegel said. “We do both those things. We want to encourage infill housing and also make sure the open spaces we love are protected.”

But not all are happy with the lines drawn in Measure A, [namely the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association](#). The group argues the proposed Urban Limit Line would tie the hands of local decision-makers when it comes to housing decisions. It would also limit where new homes can be built, going against the state’s goals of developing more housing amid a shortage and affordability crisis.

Regional housing policy has focused on increasing density in cities by encouraging multiunit infill and transit-oriented housing, the thought being that residents would benefit from being near amenities.

Not all want to live in apartments, though, Contra Costa Taxpayers Association President Marc Joffe argued. And jurisdictions around the country have figured out how to extend amenities like water and public safety.

“We’ve developed a land use policy that promotes a form of living that some people don’t want,” Joffe said. “If we want a vibrant population, we have to cater to all.”

Also a concern are the 9,460 acres of net land being removed from within the Urban Limit Line, meaning that property could not be developed, Joffe said, noting potential development in places like Clayton and Byron would be disrupted under the proposal.

Speaking for himself, Joffe said he personally would not have opposed the Urban Limit Line, had the county allowed more land to be developed.

People are waking up, Joffe said, to what he described as unsuccessful housing policies that don’t aid in the affordability crisis.

“This is the beginning of educating people to the point that you simply can’t solve the housing affordability crisis by simply building apartments near BART. It’s just not going to work,” Joffe said. “This is something other states like Texas and Arizona have figured out.”

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The Taxpayers Association's opposition to Measure A came as a surprise, Siegel said. The new lines proposed are largely unchanged from what was adopted in 2006, and either shift to align with existing city boundaries or to take into consideration property where development would be infeasible, she said.

An additional 11,100 acres will no longer be developable under the new Urban Limit Line boundaries, but much of that land is made up of steep hills or in fire or flood zones, according to a county map. Some of that land is also owned by the East Bay Regional Parks District, which is being turned into public space.

Just more than 1,600 acres are being added to developable land, though, creating the 9,460 net change.

Siegel called the Taxpayer Association's arguments against Measure A concerning. Its website is persuasive because it warps facts around issues people care about, she said.

Rebutting arguments, Siegel said Measure A wouldn't take away local control because it's Contra Costa County residents who will decide whether or not to keep it in place. If approved, plenty of space for housing will remain within the Urban Limit Line boundary.

"I think they're playing on important issues people care about and morphing them into something that's not true," Siegel said.

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