



Transcript of Video Interview with Steve Bennett, County Supervisor, Ventura County, recorded approx. 2007.

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JB: Hello, and welcome to Heroes of the Coast. My name is Janet Bridgers, with Earth Alert.

Have you ever noticed, if you drive north on 101, that Ventura County doesn't look like Los Angeles? We're here today with Steve Bennett, County Supervisor Steve Bennett from Ventura County who is going to tell us a lot of the reasons why the two places are so very different.

Steve, thank you for driving in.

SB: Thanks for having me, Janet.

JB: So you've been a Ventura County Supervisor for...

SB: Five and a half years.

JB: And before that you were?

SB: A Ventura City Council member for one term, from '93 to '97. I took a break from '97 to 2000, to run the SOAR initiatives and then was elected to the Board of Supervisors after that.

JB: We're going to get back to all of that. There are few politicians who have such records environmentally as yours and I'm going to read a statement: "Beginning in the '80s, when Steve lead Alliance for Ventura's Future and through the years when he helped other progressive candidates get elected to city council, eventually running successfully himself, and later running for the 1st District on the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, Steve Bennett has been a key leader and strategist in keeping Ventura from being completely overrun by urban sprawl."

This is a statement by Alan Sanders, the conservation chair of the Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Most politicians don't have that kind of imprimatur. But agriculture is still one of the largest sectors of the economy in Ventura County. Is that correct?

SB: It certainly is. Yes, it's one of our largest and it's one of our most stable economic sectors. It has less variation than most of our other economic industries.

JB: And the largest products are still citrus, correct? Strawberries, celery, broccoli, avocados, any others?

SB: We call all those others row crops, but it's sort of the citrus and avocados, lemons are very big and strawberries are very big. Strawberries and lemons are huge crops for us now in Ventura County.

JB: And is this realistically that California is feeding much of the nation?

SB: Certainly, and much of Japan, much of Asia.

JB: Really?

SB: The number one market for lemons in Ventura County is Japan. We make more money selling 'em to Japan than anyplace else, even in the United States.

JB: Really? So we have the rich soil, obviously, but. I think, the weather is a primary factor, too.

SB: It certainly is. Our farmers are able to get, with row crops, they're able to get three crops a year out of that soil, which is a tremendous advantage over climates in the Midwest, or much of the rest of the world. It's also 20 feet of topsoil in many places, 20 feet of the best topsoil in the world, and a growing climate that allows you to get three crops out. It certainly is very productive farmland.

JB: And tell us about the effort that became the SOAR initiative...Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources began.

SB: Well, a group of people like myself, like-minded people, got together and we all were scratching our heads saying, "if we're just going to try and play defense and stop this development and then try and stop this development, the question will simply be, 'how much can we slow 'em down,' but they're going to take over Ventura County, and instead of it being five years, it might be 10, but it's a losing battle.

So we decided to do...we need to come up with a strategy that puts us on the offensive rather than the defensive. Not only playing defensive doesn't make sense, but also it completely wears out grassroots citizens and they eventually lose the ability to keep fighting. Meanwhile the developers, who make so much money off of this, they just keep coming and coming.

And we came up with this going-on-the-offensive strategy when Napa County passed an initiative and it went all the way to the California Supreme Court, and that basically said that citizens could demand that before their general plan is changed, that it actually go in front of the citizens for their approval, rather than just the elected officials.

So we dramatically expanded the Napa County initiative, which only affected the county government, and we created a SOAR initiative for all of the cities in Ventura County, and county government at the same time. And we launched...everyone thought we were crazy. We launched one big battle. We put all of the initiatives on the ballot at the same time, so we had seven cities and the county...

JB: There were separate initiatives?

SB: Separate initiatives, that's right. We had to gather 75,000 signatures, and most of the time, all with volunteers, and most of the time, in the cities, when you signed, you signed twice. You signed an initiative for the city you were in, and then you also signed for the county at the same time. But we were able to mobilize people because we were able to convince people: "Let's get ourselves on the offensive." And now, the tables have been completely turned. Now, the developers have to come to the citizens to get approval for the development and convince the citizens, rather than the citizens having to go to the city council and try to get the city council to not approve the development that the developers already greased the skids, so to speak, with campaign contributions and friendly relations with elected officials and that kind of stuff.

JB: So, tell us in a little more detail exactly what it does. It requires a vote?

SB: A lot of people say it's "ballot-box planning." I know you probably want to get into that later, but it simply says that whatever the general plan zoning designations are, you have to live with those zoning designations. So if you're already...if your general plan already says, "this area over here is allowed to be developed," then the city council can develop that. But if this land over here is zoned as agriculture, open space, or if it's outside of the city right now, the city can't go and change their plan and bring that in unless they get approval of the citizens of the city.

JB: Is it simple majority vote?

SB: It's a simple majority vote.

JB: But does it have to wait for the next election?

SB: No, they can call a special election.

JB: That's expensive.

SB: Yeah, even if they want to do that, yes, and the developers have no problems paying for the special election, because those are usually a low-turnout election and they hope they can actually do better in low-turnout elections, so we are seeing sort of a pattern of the developers convincing the city council to call a special election and the developer says, "we'll pay for the election," and then they pick one. We have one right now in Santa Paula. The election is going to be Tuesday, April 18th. Now that happens to be the Tuesday after Easter and the Tuesday after taxes are due on Monday, and it's not a coincidence that they chose probably one of the most difficult times to get grassroots citizens all motivated, right after taxes, right during the Easter season in terms of trying to campaign. So they did that intentionally, but that's what we have to deal with at this point in time. But it's certainly much better than trying to go down and mobilize everybody to go to 20 planning commission meetings to try to stop a project. It's much better to have one election where we mobilize all the citizens to vote against it.

JB: And when these have come up in the past, how have they gone?

SB: Well, so far, no developer has gotten a major project through in Ventura County.

JB: Really?

SB: So, we hope we can keep that pattern up and the message will really get out there that we need to develop inside the existing city limits first, and really do that well, before we consider an expansion. And expansions, if they ever do take place, should be very minimal and thoughtful.

Classic situation that was going on before we did SOAR in Ventura County happened here in Los Angeles, San Fernando Valley, and in Orange County. When the population grew by 20 percent, the urbanized area grew by 40 percent. And so you were urban sprawling twice as fast as your population was even growing.

Well, up in Portland, where they used urban growth boundaries, what they found was after they had done a pretty good job of infilling, and they decided they were going to expand the boundary, a 20 percent increase in population was projected to be taken care of with only a two percent in urban area. So the trick is to dramatically change that ratio of what do you urbanize relative to your population growth. But sprawling out in big tract homes is certainly does not treat the land as the precious resource that it is, particularly agricultural land like we've talked about that is so rich and productive. To sprawl over that with tract homes that are spread out does not make any sense from a long term planning standpoint.

JB: Well, it certainly doesn't. What would we do if we didn't have farmland close by? With the era of peak oil, we can envision the time when it will not be possible to put produce from a long way away into a truck and ship it across country, or to put fruit in an airplane and fly it all over the world.

SB: Yes, certainly trying to get...I think we have a lot of education to do, but people ought to realize that buying local and buying locally grown fruits and vegetables and locally grown food makes sense for lots of reasons. It's good for your economy. It keeps that very stable sector—agriculture—which is much more stable than lots of other economic engines that are out there, but also, it's a long term economic security for you.

If you have long term problems, you want to be able to grow enough food to feed your own citizens. And some countries certainly learned that really well in World War Two, when they had become dependent on food imports, and then the war broke out and they couldn't get those food imports. I don't think we ever want to get into that situation in the United States, but it can happen if we pollute our aquifers, if we pave over our rich agricultural land. It's not just Ventura County. The Central Valley of California, the breadbasket of the United States for many of our food crops, and that is being urbanized at a rapid rate, and a scary rate.

JB: One of the issues that goes along with this that I think is...perhaps fewer people think about is the issues related to housing for farm workers, the whole immigration issue. Do you have anything that you'd like to comment about those issues and how they affect farming country.

SB: I sure do. The old system was building nothing but high-end tract homes, because the old system was driven by only one factor, and that is the profits of the developer. The developer wasn't interested in building a true mix of affordable housing for all income levels. I mean, look at every time that happens. You kind of have to force some of it down their throat and they're really happy if they can force 10 percent affordable housing in there. And then they play with the definition and the affordable becomes almost unaffordable for most citizens.

But what SOAR is doing in Ventura County is it's forcing the development inside of the cities, the existing cities, and when you do that, when you're redeveloping areas et cetera, you're much more likely to build a true mix of housing, small units, condos, townhouses, things that can be much more affordable for people, for your workforce, for your farm workers and all of those people, and the smart growth principles are catching on. The City of Ventura is really starting to lead the way from that stand point. I think you'll see us much more likely in Ventura County to actually address the issue of a true mix of housing than you will in areas...certainly San Diego County, Orange County. I mean you drive through Orange County and much of San Diego County, you see the same kind of high-end tract homes, and that does not solve your affordable housing crisis at all.

JB: No, it certainly doesn't. And it's bad for business, as well, too, because young people who are just becoming part of the workforce can't afford to buy generally.

SB: Right.

JB: What do your critics say about the SOAR initiative?

SB: Well, we certainly did have lots of critics and particularly when we started, the number one argument that was made was that the farmers said, "look, if SOAR is so good for agriculture, why do virtually all the farmers in Ventura County oppose it?" And what we had to do was educate the public in terms of trying to answer that question, and one of the things that's really helpful for everybody to realize, when I was on the city council, we had 100 acres of agricultural land appraised by an independent appraiser, and 100 acres of "ag-land" was worth \$3 million. And we asked the question, "what if the city council votes to rezone that land from agriculture to development?" That's all we do. We don't build the homes yet, we don't do anything else, we just have that vote. So the next morning after that vote, that same 100 acres that was worth \$3 million would be worth \$12 million. Now that is a tremendous incentive to convert agricultural land over to development in Southern California and in Ventura County. So that's the biggest threat, and once people realize that, they could understand why so many that owned agricultural land were probably not necessarily giving advice in terms of what was best for agriculture in Ventura County, but rather what was best for their development and their ability to profit off of the land. That was probably the early critical statement.

Another one was the issue of property rights. They said, "hey, it's our property. We should be allowed to do as we want with it." Our response is, "a community has the right to plan their community, and if you let everybody do what they want with their land, you have chaos." If you live in a neighborhood, a residential neighborhood, just because your neighbor could make a lot of money putting a McDonalds in his front yard, doesn't mean that the residential neighborhood

ought to suddenly tolerate a McDonalds in the front yard in that situation. So that was the second sort of criticism that was thrown out there.

A third one was that this was going to be “ballot-box planning,” that citizens would not be able to do all of this land use planning. And one of the unique things about SOAR is that citizens don’t do all of the planning. SOAR says that when you go to change the general plan, you need a vote of the citizens. But the general plan was designed by experts and designed with lots of appropriate input, so they create the plan. Now our point was if you looked at the general plans of all kinds of cities, none of them ever said if you went to the San Fernando Valley, you’ll find no plan that says “let’s pave over the whole San Fernando Valley,” because the citizens would have gone ballistic. But what they do is they create the general plan that looks pretty good and then they keep making piecemeal exceptions to the plan. The city councils override and say, “well, we know this isn’t in the plan, but we want to develop over here, and we know this isn’t in the plan, but we want to develop here.”

So if you stop the piecemeal developments, and you stick with your plans, you usually get much better urban development, and that’s all SOAR does. SOAR says “stick with your current plan, and if you want to change it, and you want to go outside of what you’ve planned for, that’s when you have to go to the citizens and get approval.”

JB: Well, the San Fernando Valley is a great example of what...I can’t imagine anybody would want to happen. It has no cohesiveness, it’s just mile after mile of strip malls...

SB: One of the great advantages that we tried to point out with SOAR is that if you can keep your communities distinct and you can create a green belt buffer between your communities, people actually feel much more connected to their place. When you drive through San Fernando Valley, you can’t tell when you leave one city and you go to the next city. In Ventura County, you can almost always tell when you leave a city, because you pass through a certain amount of open space and agricultural land before you get to the next city. And that keeps that sense of identity, that sense of community, and therefore people are much more willing to solve other kinds of problems in their city because they really feel like “hey, this is Ventura and we’re going to take care of the homeless in Ventura. We’re going to take care of the mentally ill in Ventura. We’re going to take care of the foster kids in Ventura, because Ventura is a unique separate place in everybody’s mind.”

JB: People have a sense of ownership about their community.

SB: Sure, sure, when it’s distinct like that. And in Southern California, that doesn’t happen very many places, and we’re really fighting to keep that in Ventura County.

JB: And would you say that that has also been part of what has spawned the greater environmental activism in Ventura County, say compared to Los Angeles or Orange County?

SB: Well, yeah. Certainly I think SOAR has helped energize people what felt hopeless before we had SOAR, but they really saw. We had some dramatic moments in our campaigns that I think really let people realize how much they could affect things.

I remember in the City of Ventura, we had the city race before launched on the countywide effort, we tried it in the city. And we had phone calling going along, all along with our volunteers and we were doing okay in the polls, but SOAR was brand new, and whenever you have something brand new, people have a tendency to vote no because they don't understand it. And then all of a sudden, the week before the election, our polling numbers just dropped on our tracking polling that we were doing with just our volunteers. And what we'd found out was that the building and industry association had funneled a whole lot of money and had professionals calling everybody in Ventura and confusing them, "if you want to save ag land, make sure you vote 'no.'" And it got everyone confused and everything else.

But we mobilized all of our volunteers on the last weekend. We burned the phone lines up for about 24 hours, 12 hours on Saturday, 12 hours on Sunday, calling everybody we could in the City of Ventura. Well, that Tuesday, we won because 400 people voted yes instead of voting no. And if we had not mobilized all those people that last weekend, we would have lost. And if we would have lost the first one, we never would have done the countywide initiative and everything else. So that was a 52 to 48 percent vote, with only 400 people switching their votes would have cost us that election. It would have demoralized everybody. Instead, it energized everybody and people said, "we can do this. We can do it countywide." And then when people see other problems, they say, "let's go and tackle those problems, too." There was a sense of hopelessness, I think, for many of us before, because we kept losing battle after battle to each piecemeal development project. This has been energizing.

JB: So many people do have a sense of hopelessness about politics and the world in general, and they say, "well, one person can't make a difference and my vote doesn't really matter." But this is yet another example of where that is absolutely proof.

SB: We almost consistently have been opposed by the elected officials in each city where we've had SOAR. We've been opposed by the newspapers consistently, and yet this has so much support at the grassroots level. It's a classic example of proving that the elected officials on the issue of urban sprawl are out of touch with the core values of the citizens they're supposed to represent. I don't think there's any question that that's the case.

And it's partially because the largest contributors to campaigns at the local level are people involved in the development industry. It's pro-development forces.

JB: Do you see any way to change that?

SB: Well, that's why the second reform, right after we did SOAR, is then I wrote a very tough campaign contribution limit law for the City of Ventura, and then when I was elected to the Board of Supervisors, I did the same thing at the Board of Supervisors' level. At the City of Ventura level, the City Council refused to pass it. So we put it on the ballot and 80 percent of the citizens voted for it. And it's just another example of sort of changing the dynamics so that "big money" can't go in and have undue influence on the elections and as a result, the decisions of city councils and the boards of supervisors.

JB: Now you're hearing from a lot of places around the country, or even beyond perhaps?

SB: Not outside the country, but we have heard from lots of people around the country that are interested in doing this.

JB: Have any of them implemented it as yet?

SB: Sadly, most of the people who contact us end up being under-organized and under-funded, and those...that's the kiss of death when you're going to take on the building industry association. We were out-spent 10 to one in our first election, and we were able to hang on and win. But you have to have a very cohesive team of people and you have to have done your fundraising in advance, so that you have the money you need. You're so busy at the end of an initiative campaign that you can't be trying to raise the money at that point in time.

What we did in Ventura is we went around and contacted people and we got pledges from people. And we said, "until we have \$100,000 in pledges, we're not going to start gathering signatures." Because the day you start gathering signatures is when the clock starts ticking. Most people get in a rush. They throw some people together. Everybody's fired up. They write the initiative. They start gathering the signatures and then they start raising the money, after the fact. Well, once you start gathering the signatures, you usually only have about six months before you're going to have an election, and then they don't have enough money. The developers hit 'em with all kinds of misinformation and they don't have the ability to counter that.

We had a very cohesive team of people that had a broad array of talents that we needed in the campaign—great graphic artist, great attorney, great communicators, great organizers in each of the cities that were able to do that. And it was a remarkable team that held that together and allowed us to be successful. So when everybody calls, we emphasize, "do those two things first, and then write your initiative." But unfortunately, things seem to go wrong in more counties than go right, and Northern California, some of them have been able to do it. Nobody's been able to do it for the whole county and all of the cities in the county yet.

I'll give you one classic example. San Diego. Some good people there, really well organized, but San Diego is more than three times bigger than Ventura and consequently they have to raise so much money, that they simply...it's difficult to raise money when you get to a county that size in terms of trying to communicate.

JB: Now the SOAR initiative sunsets in a few years. When is that, and what happens after that?

SB: Well, it sunsets in 2020, and if we don't do anything, then we go back to where we were before.

JB: Well, that's still a good long time.

SB: Well, it is, but I think you can imagine from, certainly my enthusiasm for it, I don't think there's any intention on our part to let it sunset. I think we'll "re-up" SOAR before it expires.

JB: And do you see any future in terms of organic agriculture raising the value of food products?

SB: No question. I think that's one of the things that could be a good help to solve sort of the international competition issue that we have. But we have to be realistic. It's going to take education and it will be a slow process, but Ventura County is getting more and more willing to embrace organics, certainly more so than before the SOAR initiatives came forward.

JB: Steve, thank you so much for being our guest today.

SB: You're welcome, Janet. Thank you.

JB: Viewers, thank you for being our guest.

[end of interview]