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## Deal ensures Davis-Dixon buffer

By Jim Downing -- Bee Staff Writer

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Located just between Davis and Dixon, the Ebey-Laughtin Ranch comprises 146 acres described as a farmer's dream, with a good deal of soil that scientists rate a perfect 100, and now no developer can ever lay claim to it.

A \$2 million deal, announced Thursday, expands a belt of protected farmland separating the two cities by nearly 50 percent and extinguishes future development rights.

"It's a very expensive place to do this sort of thing, but it's also very key," said Dixon City Manager Warren Salmons. "If there's a fulcrum point, this would be it."

In combination with a similar transaction on the adjacent 300-acre McConeghy Ranch unveiled in December, Thursday's news marks almost the halfway point in reaching a goal set in 1999 to keep a 1,000-acre agricultural buffer between the two cities.

The amount of protected land is likely to grow: Officials are already in discussions with owners of several adjacent parcels.

The growing zone of dedicated farmland illustrates a growing trend up and down the Central Valley. With nearly 50,000 acres paved over each year statewide, more and more communities are using "agricultural easements" that restrict land conversion.

"I think we're going to see exponential growth in these in the coming years," said Greg Kirkpatrick, a Visalia-based consultant for the Solano Land Trust, which brokered the two deals.

As the rising value of real estate gives farmers ever more incentive to sell out to developers, local governments and environmental groups are using easements to compensate owners for giving up development rights.

Cities are coming up with new ways to purchase easements. Davis, for instance, imposes a parcel tax; both Davis and Dixon collect fees from developers.

In the case of the McConeghy and Ebey-Laughtin properties, the combined real estate value was \$7.44 million. But with the development rights stripped away, the value -- as eternal farmland -- dropped to \$1.74 million, according to Wendy Low, a land transaction specialist with the Solano Land Trust.

The balance, \$5.7 million, represents \$2 million worth of development rights for Ebey-Laughtin Ranch and \$3.7 million for McConeghy Ranch. This sum was paid to the landowners by six sources: the state Department of Conservation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, cities of Davis and Dixon, Solano Land Trust, and UC Davis.

Several members of an extended local family bought the ranches for the agricultural value of \$1.74 million. They include Rich Collins, president of California Vegetable Specialties in Rio Vista, the nation's only grower of Belgian endive; and six members of the Leatherby family, owners of Leatherby's Family Creamery in Sacramento and Citrus Heights.

Collins said that he plans to slowly transition the land into a mix of fruit and nut orchards and vegetable crops, along with pasture and possibly a small dairy.

Of the land, Collins said: "It's deep. It's fertile. It's forgiving."

Buying an easement-protected plot of farmland isn't a simple transaction. In this case, prospective buyers submitted bids, as well as proposals to the Solano Land Trust detailing how they'd put the land to use. The highest bidder doesn't necessarily get to buy the land, Low said.

In most such deals, Low said, the ratio of the value of development rights to agricultural value isn't as high as it was in this case. The location of the ranches along Interstate 80 near an offramp drove the price up, she said.

That's exactly why it was important to preserve the land, said Salmons.

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