

November 15, 2021

San Jose City Council
City of San Jose

Re: Protecting Coyote Valley is a vote for the environment and equity in San Jose

Dear Mayor Liccardo and Councilmembers,

We are 41 local leaders committed to advancing race equity in San Jose and throughout the Bay Area. Historically marginalized communities including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color bear the brunt of climate crisis impacts. We have very little time to make big changes and over the next decade we need to build resilience into the physical environment of our communities. Protecting and restoring at-risk open space and shifting to entirely infill development is an important way to do this.

We support the city staff and general plan task force recommendations for permanent protection of the Coyote Valley region as open space and agriculture. It is urgent that the San Jose City Council approve the General Plan amendments and the related actions in the Staff Report. This is both an environmental and an equity issue, and we urge the City Council to act without delay so we can start protecting and restoring this precious part of our region.

One of the first steps toward race equity is to acknowledge that unless we are descendants of the local Native American tribe, we reside on unceded land. The United States began with the conquest and genocide of Indigenous People. In the San Jose region, we reside on the sacred land of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area. For thousands of years, ancestors of the Muwekma Tribe stewarded the Coyote Valley region. Native American people have an inherent stake in any environmental issue in their traditional territory and are uniquely impacted by environmental degradation. The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area and the Amah Mutsun Tribe are both members of the Protect Coyote Valley coalition and support the permanent protection of Coyote Valley. Their ancestors understood that if we do not take care of the environment, then we face extinction as a people because we have a codependent relationship with land, wildlife, plants, and the Earth itself.

Low-income, historically marginalized residents stand to gain the most from climate action. Extreme weather events have outsized and long-term impacts on vulnerable communities because they are much less able to recover from the destruction of property and the costs of relocation. There are residents along the Coyote Creek watershed who still have not recovered from the impacts of the 2017 flood in San Jose. The flood, which occurred on Feb. 21, 2017, following heavy storms, caused an estimated \$100 million in damage and forced the emergency evacuation of 14,000 residents of neighborhoods in and around downtown San Jose.

Since Coyote Valley filters residents' drinking water and air and limits the urban heat island effect, its protection is an act of environmental justice. A protected and restored Coyote Valley serves as San Jose's green infrastructure and helps to protect residents downstream from flooding. A developed Coyote Valley would have the opposite effect, increasing flood risk, reducing air quality, putting our water quality at risk, reducing a local water source, and increasing emissions and temperatures.

Furthermore, according to the 2020 study, *The Benefits of Saving San Jose's Coyote Valley: A Case Study in Climate Action Planning*, concentrating infill development in downtown San Jose instead of in Coyote Valley would reduce passenger vehicle greenhouse gas emissions by at least 14,000 metric tons per year. It would also double the percentage of residents (from 1.7% to 3.4%) who can access a quarter of San Jose's jobs within 30 minutes via public transit.

Food security is a real issue for San Jose residents and protecting local farmland is a part of the solution. One in four people in Silicon Valley are at risk of hunger. A new Second Harvest study suggests that 26.8% of the population – almost 720,000 people – qualify as “food insecure.” In the face of the climate crisis, access to locally-grown food matters now more than ever. Coyote Valley is prime farmland and can provide San Jose residents with local, fresh produce. The 7,400 acres of agricultural land could eventually generate \$50 million per year and benefit San Jose by providing access to fresh, sustainable produce. Furthermore, Coyote Valley is one of the last remaining locations in San Jose that is large enough to implement a local regenerative agriculture effort which would include farming and grazing practices that, among other benefits, can help San Jose reach its climate goals by rebuilding soil organic matter – resulting in both carbon drawdown and improving the water cycle. Regenerative agriculture practices have roots in historic Indigenous knowledge of how to work with the land.

Investment in open space is particularly critical for people who are negatively impacted by economic disadvantage, systemic racism, trauma, opportunity gaps, and other challenges. According to a [2020 report from the Center for American Progress and the Hispanic Access Foundation](#), communities of color experience nature deprivation at three times the rate of white Americans. Experiences in nature can help ameliorate high blood pressure, anxiety, sleeplessness and other harmful health conditions associated with environmental racism and the stressors that disproportionately affect communities of color and low income. Preserving ample open space is critical for providing city dwellers with a safe opportunity to exercise while social distancing.

Affordable infill development within the current development footprint of the city is a more efficient use of resources. Prioritizing the health and resilience of our community means making open space investments paired with affordable housing policies and strategies. The City should prioritize resources to develop infill housing. Developing in the Wildland Urban Interface and in rural areas that are prone to fires and floods will only further deplete public resources that can be better spent in other parts of the city. Sprawl inequitably spreads city resources that could be better used on city services such as libraries, parks, affordable housing, and other community services. Infill is more cost-effective for cities and counties, since the infrastructure is already established.

Building infill is better for the local economy and local workers since this type of construction creates better-paying jobs for construction workers. The wage difference between infill and urban sprawl housing building projects is at least 60% and workers who build in downtown cores bring more money home to their families. Moreover, economic studies have shown that very few jobs would be created by the more likely development, warehouses, which provide no significant economic benefit to San Jose by locating them in Coyote Valley.

Acting now is increasingly urgent. Developments over the last year have only increased the need for immediate action on the climate crisis and on taking local actions for environmental

equity and inclusion. This is in the alarmed recognition of the threat of a newly-proposed, 2.3 million square-foot, Amazon-style warehouse for Coyote Valley, paving over farmland and open space and running hundreds of truck trips through wildlife corridors, all combined with more air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. This destructive proposal for Coyote Valley itself makes the case that the City Council should take action without delay to ensure a better future for all, especially including those excluded from the benefits of our system.

We sign this letter as community leaders working to confront and address issues of equity in San Jose and throughout the Bay Area region. We believe that the health of people and our communities is inextricably tied to caring for our remaining working lands and wild places.

Sincerely

Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh

Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area Chairwoman

Chairman Valentin Lopez

Amah Mutsun Tribal Band Chairman

Blanca Alvarado

Former Santa Clara County Supervisor

Rod Diridon, Sr.

Former Santa Clara County Supervisor

Jim Beall

Former California State Senator

Tamara Alvarado

Firekeeper with Calpulli Tonalehqueh

Michele Lew

The Health Trust CEO

Gregory R. Kepferle

Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County CEO

Darcie Green

Latinas Contra Cancer Executive Director

Gabriela Chavez-Lopez

Latina Coalition of Silicon Valley Executive Director

Milan R. Balinton

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Mary Jessie Celestin

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Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez

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Victor Vasquez

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Josué García

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Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful Executive Director

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Open Space Authority Santa Clara Valley Director - District 4