

Clackamas County on lonely side of industrial reserves bill

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By Hannah Leone

Industrial land is one of those things that finds its way into many a Clackamas County commission meeting. In a county short on jobs, industrial land is synonymous with what commissioners consider much-needed employment land. That's why they're pushing a bill that would allow them to pick several hundred acres of land from outside the Urban Growth Boundary to designate as an industrial reserve.

Land defined as predominantly flat, with access to transportation or freight infrastructure and free from unresolved environmental concerns or development constraints, could house businesses that would employ some of the county's more than 21,000 jobless residents.

Clackamas County had a 5.5 percent unemployment rate as of this February, which is slightly higher than the other two counties in the metro area; Multnomah County's unemployment rate is 5.2 percent, while Washington County's is 4.9 percent, according to the most recent United States Department of Labor Statistics. The county has a goal of creating 10,000 new family wage jobs by 2019 and maintaining a supply of large-lot industrial lands.

The metro area has 4,100 acres of vacant industrial land and 3,200 acres of redevelopable industrial land. This includes five industrial sites that are at least 100 acres in size, according to Metro's 2014 inventory. Of 14 industrial sites totaling about 650 acres that are considered "market-ready," available for development in the near future, one Multnomah County site is at least 100 acres. Two of Clackamas County's four industrial sites are "market-ready," both in the 25-49 acre range, according to the Metro report..

So county commissioners voted last month to support SB 716, which would authorize Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties each to designate one large-lot

industrial reserve of 150 to 500 acres for future inclusion in the Urban Growth Boundary. A proposed amendment would replace Washington with Columbia County.

Some have called SB 716, and other bills affecting reserves designations in the metro area, "Grand betrayals" to last year's "Grand Bargain," which legislated Washington County's urban and rural reserves for the next 50 years.

"There is an amendment to the bill that specifically exempts Washington County," said Washington County Chair Andy Duyck. "We have our own urban and rural reserves and are satisfied with what we've got. The amendment means we would not have the option to create industrial lands designations outside the urban growth boundary. This is not our bill. It comes out of Clackamas County and we are not taking a position on it."

Clackamas County sent Commissioner Tootie Smith to Salem on Monday to testify in favor of the bill. But even the commission isn't totally sure where the bill came from, said Chair John Ludlow.

Some, including Friends of the French Prairie and Charbonneau residents, think the Maletis brothers are behind the bill.

Chris and Tom Maletis, who own the Langdon Farms Golf Club south of Wilsonville, were among a couple dozen appellants to a 2012 Land Conservation and Development Commission decision affirming urban and rural reserves designated by Metro, Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties. The Maletis' Langdon Farms property had been designated by Clackamas County and Metro as a rural reserve.

The brothers asked LCDC to remand the reserves back to Metro, presumably in hopes of getting Langdon Farms out of rural reserves and into contention for future UGB expansions, according to a November 2014 Metro article.

Hasina Squires, a lobbyist representing Langdon Farms, said the brothers support SB 716 but are focusing instead on HB 3313, which specifically would designate the Langdon Farms property as urban reserve. "We like the bill. We like lots of bills in this process," Squires said. "We engage more in ones that directly affect [Langdon Farms]."

Rep. Julie Parrish, a sponsor of SB 716, said she doesn't think HB 3313, which she sponsors, is going anywhere. The Langdon Farms property interests her because of its

location and potential, but no land has been agreed upon as the industrial reserve in the bill, she said. "That is going to be a fun conversation," Parrish said. "If [SB 716] passes, we need to go back to the county and say what is that property?" A large-lot reserve is necessary, rather than smaller industrial plots, because the land-use system is not keeping up with jobs, Parrish said.

Regardless of Langdon Farms' involvement, citizens and local and regional government leaders have brought up many reasons why they don't think SB 716 is a good idea.

1000 Friends of Oregon opposes SB 716, claiming that the bill is fundamentally unfair and undermines citizen trust in government. Additionally, the land-use nonprofit argues the premise behind the bill - that the Portland Metro area lacks sufficient large lot industrial sites - is wrong. 1000 Friends lists seven examples of existing large-lot industrial sites in the Willamette Valley where significant public and private investments have already been made to bring the areas "shovel-ready status." None of the sites listed are in Clackamas County.

The two premises represent the main arguments made by dozens who testified against the bill. Clackamas County Farm Bureau president Jon Iverson wrote that the bureau is against SB 716 not because it takes farmland and earmarks it for immediate industrial development (the farmers are not excited about that but realize it happens, he wrote), but because they disagree with the process the legislature is using to accomplish that objective.

Tualatin is working with Wilsonville on the Basalt Creek concept plan, which will create additional industrial lands, Tualatin Mayor Lou Ogden wrote in a letter opposing the bill. "Through our outreach to industry exports, our findings show there is not an apparent demand for 100-acre parcels," Ogden wrote.

Others worry the bill would enable the destruction of high-value farmland. As its public hearing continued Wednesday in the Senate Environment and Natural Resources committee, many more people testified in opposition of the reserves bill than in support of it. Sen. Chris Edwards, D-Eugene, the committee chair, asked a lot of questions at the end of the hearing. He wanted to know how quickly the industrial reserves could be designated, and how practical it was to bank on aggregating large lots of industrial land.

"There is a piece of me that thinks the bill is pointless, because there are a lot of legal steps to go through," Edwards said.

Dick Sheeley, a site planner in favor of the bill, said while aggregating parcels of land for future development -- a practice known as land banking -- can be viable in many places, it usually works better in locations with more demand. Oregon tends not to have so much demand for large sites, he said. In his experience, land banking only works when it's driven by a common vision of all property owners and local governments involved, he said. These situations require a lot of work and are more successful with fewer property owners.

"One holdout can mess up a project," Sheehy said. "[Aggregating properties] has to be done before a company will agree to use land."

Dana Tims of The Oregonian/OregonLive contributed to this report.