

A work in progress

Langdon Farms owners Chris and Tom Maletis break silence to share thoughts on development



Chris (left) and Tom Maletis own 385 acres south of the Willamette River which has been the subject of a debate about future development for years. For the first time in several years, the brothers answered questions about their intentions for their property.

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All that's left of the nursery is a concrete slab and broken pipes jutting from the ground.

Standing among the remnants, brothers Tom and Chris Maletis watch as trucks driving Highway 51 pass by their property.

"I don't see how this property is going to be farmed again," Tom Maletis said, avoiding the broken glass sprinkled across the site. "This is the perfect location for jobs. That's all we want, is to create jobs and give back to the area that has made us so successful. We just want a win-win for everyone."

The Maletis brothers own 385 acres just south of the Willamette River from Wilsonville. For several years debate has circulated about whether the land should be developed. Last week, a new timeline was developed that will push out any decisions regarding Metro's urban/rural reserves process to May 2010.

The two men are watching the process closely.

In the past two years, they have remained relatively quiet in the public arena, allowing their legal counsel to speak publicly for them. However, when contacted last week by the Spokesman regarding the urban/rural reserves process, the two Langdon Farms Golf Course owners agreed to an interview and tour of the property.

Their views regarding development have put them in stark opposition to area residents and city leaders who want to keep their vast acreage an undeveloped reserve.

Not land speculators

The brothers grew up in Beaverton, attending both Sunset High School and the University of Oregon. They bristle at the notion they are land speculators looking to get rich quick.

“Initially we wanted to build another 18-hole golf course,” Tom Maletis said. “But as we had discussions, we realized we could do something that would help the region.”

Chris Maletis said as farm property became available around the golf course, they purchased it. They have had an interest in Langdon Farms since the 1990s and more recently purchased the property.

“It’s just good business, if there is property around you that becomes available, you should at least look at it,” Chris Maletis said.

The two brothers built up the beer and wine distributorship ran by their grandfather and father.

“When we took it over it was hurting, and we had Anheuser Busch, as their market share grew, so did our business,” Chris Maletis said.

The brothers left the day-to-day operations of the company in 2001, selling it to their younger brother. Chris Maletis, 60, began playing golf professionally. Tom Maletis, 57, got involved with running golf tournaments and charity events.

Tom Maletis volunteers as president of the Tournament Golf Foundation, which gives \$1 million a year to local children’s charities through holding golf tournaments. This August will mark the 25th anniversary of the LPGA tournament that he oversees.

“Our family continues to be very, very community-minded and supportive,” Chris Maletis said. “Even in business, if you look at our past dealings as a beer and wine distributor, we have donated to the community and try to be good business leaders.”

An eye on the urban-rural reserves process

The Maletis brothers believe their property, buffered by Interstate 5, Arndt, Airport and Miley roads, should be included in the urban reserve – an area outside the current urban growth boundary that could accommodate population and job growth for the next 40 to 50 years.

During the last Legislative session, the brothers supported Senate Bill 1011, which created the urban-rural reserves process. This session, they have been quietly watching the process.

“We are committed to this process, because we think anyone looking at this property objectively will come to the conclusion it should be an urban reserve,” Chris Maletis said. “It doesn’t mean it’s going to be developed tomorrow, but it means in the next 50 years. It only makes sense, where its location is and the infrastructure and the transportation that it would be part of an urban

reserve. That's why it makes all the sense in the world to get involved in the process this year and not be involved with the Legislature."

Mark Cushing, Maletis' Portland-based attorney, said several business organizations and economic development committees have come forward saying the land should be studied as an urban reserve. Cushing also said that organizations like the Clackamas County Business Alliance and the Clackamas County Economic Development Commission have started to "recognize the need" for employment lands.

"It is working much more as it was intended, where broader community groups – not just elected officials, quite frankly – look at the issue and make recommendations," Cushing said.

"As the time has gone on, the process has gotten more educated on the decisions that have to be made," Tom Maletis said.

However, others are opposed to zoning the land for development.

Mark Ottenad, government and public affairs director for the city of Wilsonville, provided the Spokesman with a May 20 draft technical memo from Maggie Dickerson, principal planner to the Clackamas County Policy Advisory Committee, that lists French Prairie as an area for rural reserve.

Rural reserves are areas to be preserved for agricultural and forestry uses and natural resources protection. Putting that designation on the Maletis property would stop any development for at least 47 years.

In addition, Friends of the French Prairie, Wilsonville city leaders and many Charbonneau residents regularly talk about how land south of the Willamette should remain undeveloped. Last month, many attended a Metro open house at city hall, where concerns about traffic, protecting farm land and urban sprawl down the valley were expressed by area residents about the Maletis property.

Maletis' argument

The brothers argue that anyone taking an objective approach to issues surrounding the region, including the need for employment, access to infrastructure and the location of property near residential centers and a regional airport, would conclude that the Maletis property should be allowed to have future developments.

"With all that said, no matter what, to be truthful to the process, and to the region, the area needs to be studied," Chris Maletis said.

He argues that anyone who understands the urban / rural reserves process and looks at their property should, at the very least, agree it should be studied.

"We get a little nervous now," he said, "when perhaps it won't even fall into the urban reserves study area."

The brothers point out there are very few, if any, 300-acre-plus parcels in the Portland metro area that have one owner, the necessary infrastructure and no environmental issues that would deter large employers from relocating to the area.

They also express concern that while their property is described by some as farmland, there actually are limited farming operations because of surrounding development, theft, and other issues.

“We have been lumped into a clever argument,” Cushing said. “Make it sound like we are French Prairie bottle land. Make it sound like the heart of French Prairie farming community. You are going to put in some industrial property and then watch like a wildfire as it takes off down the valley. It is just not the case, physically not the case, and the process can insure that it isn’t developed east of Airport Road.”

The border between Marion and Clackamas County and Airport Road makes a natural barrier to development, Cushing said. Interstate 5 to the west also protects French Prairie from future development, said Chris Maletis.

Giving their property urban reserve status would provide area communities with much needed opportunity toward employment, he said.

“One other thing that gets lost, because Wilsonville as a city, but for I-5, can be absolutely right there is enough industrial land to meet the needs of the city,” Chris Maletis said. “However with the location of I-5, our property serves a regional need. Where in the region that someone needs 150 acres, whether it’s manufacturing or whatever, where can they go? The beneficiaries of that location, the people surrounding Wilsonville, Canby, etc., where there is employment that meets the regional needs, but also helps sustain the needs of local businesses.”

They also worry that the current proposed urban reserve areas in western Washington County require people to commute for jobs on highways that are already at capacity.

“But beyond (the not in my backyard) argument, on the merits of it, we win, we are an urban reserve, let’s not dance around,” Cushing said. “And we definitely aren’t a rural reserve.”