

Bill could target golf course land

Story by: Curt Kipp
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A bill to select up to 25 industrial sites somewhere in Oregon and expedite development has attracted the attention of Charbonneau leaders.

That's no surprise. For one thing, the bill says one of the sites must be in the Portland area. For another, it proceeds to spell out criteria for one Portland-area site that practically screams "Langdon Farms Golf Club," where local officials have been fighting attempts to upzone the land for industry since 2004.

The bill stipulates that the property is at least 100 acres in size sitting next to a city's urban growth boundary and within three miles of primary Interstate access. Langdon Farms meets all these criterion.

Located where adequate transportation, water and sewer facilities can be provided within a year? Langdon Farms owner Chris Maletis says yes, although city officials disagree.

Then there's the sponsorship statement for Senate Bill 637. It was introduced "at the request of the Exit 282-A Development Company" which Maletis controls. Exit 282-A is the half-interchange providing access to Highway 551, the Wilsonville-Hubbard Cutoff.

Maletis owns the golf course and other land flanking both sides of that highway — some 400-plus acres in all. He believes it can fill the need for industrial land much better than sites Metro has added to the urban growth boundary recently.

"I think the record is clear that there is a shortage of market-driven industrial lands," Maletis said. "There is a huge difference between lands that have been colored as industrial land that don't have infrastructure, and don't meet the needs of the marketplace. Someone is not going to locate just because land is industrial."

As a new twist, Maletis said Friday he is no longer talking about redeveloping the 175-acre golf course, but rather the 230 agricultural acres he owns to the south, next to the Aurora Airport.

"After the study, the elected officials can make decisions and they can make them any way they want to make them," he said. "It's not mandating anything. If someone doesn't want to bring it in, they don't bring it in."

Maletis would need the golf course, however, to form a development site that's contiguous to the urban growth boundary, as called for in the bill.

Jack Isslemann, a lobbyist retained by Maletis, was quoted in the Capital Press as saying there are other sites out there besides Langdon Farms, that fit the criteria in Senate Bill 637.

He did not return two phone calls from the newspaper.

Meanwhile, Wilsonville officials would take exception to the idea that industrial sites aren't in the works. They are wrapping up master planning for 267 acres along Day Road, accessible from Interstate 5 via the Elligsen Road exit. Partial infrastructure was installed along Day Road when Coffee Creek Correctional Facility was built.

Battle over farmland

All along, lobbyist Greg Leo — hired by both the city of Wilsonville and the official body representing Charbonneau residents — has maintained that opposition to redeveloping Langdon Farms is not about NIMBYism. Rather, it is about protecting Willamette Valley farmland.

“This really, truly is great farmland,” he said. “For the most part, it is beautiful, flat, very farmable land. There needs to be a firm boundary between what’s urban and what’s rural.”

Ever since Langdon Farms was first proposed for industrial development in 2003, officials from Canby, Wilsonville and conservation groups have expressed fears that if the site is developed, there would be no turning back.

They feel development would continue to spread down the Willamette Valley unabated, effectively undoing the intent and spirit of Senate Bill 100, the landmark 1973 land use law that was intended to protect farmland.

Maletis, however, said the land he owns is not good farmland.

“We’re talking about lands surrounded by Langdon Farms that have been abandoned by farmers,” he said. “It’s an urban area not conducive anymore to farming.”

He is now proposing to keep Langdon Farms as a golf course to serve as a buffer between Charbonneau and the industrial area he would like to build to the south of the golf course.

“We have always been open to an open dialogue with Charbonneau to create a win-win-win,” Maletis said.

Leo said Maletis met with Charbonneau leaders in late January to talk, but the offer to keep the golf course for golf, and develop adjacent land instead, doesn’t change the debate.

“He’s speculated on this land,” Leo said. “It’s not zoned for the use he wants to put it to. No one wants to compromise on that principle We would agree for it to be agricultural. That’s what it is. That’s what it should be.”

He said that if the land is not being farmed, then Maletis is at fault. “It’s not used for farming because he’s bought it up for speculating,” Leo said. “He’s got some old buildings that he’s allowed to be beaten up to make a case for blight.”

After being introduced last month, Senate Bill 637 was assigned to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, where it has languished. Sen. Ryan Deckert (D-Beaverton) is the primary sponsor. An aide at Deckert’s office said the bill is “not a priority” for the senator. Meanwhile, time is running out. There is an April 15 deadline for bills to emerge from committee.

Tony Holt, one of the Charbonneau leaders, said several other bills could affect the Langdon Farms site.

Among those is a tribal “super casino” proposal that a Eugene developer floated in 2005, and the Klamath tribe promoted in 2006.

Legislative committee members don’t always understand the local impact of these bills, until it is explained by citizen testimony, he said. Then the bills are usually never heard from again. Instead, other approaches take their place.

“We swat them down, and they come back again,” he said.

Senate Bill 637 may be another example of a bill that dies.

“I’m pretty hopeful 637 is not going to get a hearing,” Leo said, “and so far, so good.”

Maletis, however, wouldn't predict the bill's fate.

"The legislative process is what it is," he said. "You never know what's going to happen, when it's going to happen, or how it's going to happen."