

Conservation district fights farmland development

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The issue of development pressure on Oregon farmland is on display in Clackamas County southeast of Portland. A local Soil and Water Conservation District has asked county commissioners to consider impact on farmland as they pursue additional industrial and commercial land.

A renewed move by Oregon's Clackamas County to designate more land for future industrial and commercial development prompted an unusual response from the county's Soil and Water Conservation District.

Usually, the district's board isn't very political, General Manager Tom Salzer said. But the county's decision to review the status of 1,625 acres got the conservation district's attention. The county commissioners want to know if land in three areas south and southeast of the Portland urban center, now set aside as 50-year "rural reserves" and thus open to farming, would be more beneficial as "employment lands."

The commissioners want to review the status of 800 acres south of the city of Wilsonville; 400 acres adjacent to the urban growth boundary of the city of Canby; and 425 acres south of the Clackamas River along Springwater Road. County officials believe the land should revert to "undesignated" rather than rural reserves.

Board members of the Clackamas Soil and Water Conservation District decided they should speak up. On June 29, Salzer delivered a letter to the five-member county commission. The primary point was succinct: "The District believes the County's current initiative to create employment lands may not adequately consider the long-term value of high-value farmland. A significant amount of the land proposed for reconsideration as employment land is high-value farmland, an irreplaceable natural resource."

Salzer said the conservation district's board is concerned about the longterm future of farmland in Clackamas County, which despite being adjacent to Portland remains one of Oregon's top five agricultural counties. The county is particularly known for growing Christmas trees, nursery crops and berries.

But it's also known for political contention — some Portlanders derisively call it “Clackastan” — and for opposition to Metro, the land-use planning agency for the tri-county Portland area. The current county commission chair and vice chair, John Ludlow and Tootie Smith, are generally viewed as favoring job growth and development over land-use restrictions.

The commissioners point to an economic study by a consulting firm, Johnson Economics and Mackenzie, that said the county is short between 329 and 934 acres of industrial land and up to 246 acres of commercial land, an overall shortage of up to 1,180 acres over the next 20 years. The conservation district, however, has some concerns. The acreage south of Wilsonville involves land adjacent to the Aurora Airport and Langdon Farms golf course. It has long been proposed for development by its owners, while farm groups and land-use watchdogs oppose development spreading into prime Willamette Valley farmland.

The acreage next to the city of Canby is Class 1 agricultural soil, some of the best farmland in the valley, said Jim Johnson, the Oregon Department of Agriculture's land-use specialist.

The conservation district is alarmed at the prospect of losing more farmland, said Salzer, the general manager. “This is remarkable,” he said. “It's the first time this board has stood up as a unanimous body and said, ‘Wait a minute. Farmland is being threatened and we need to do something about it.’”

Jeff Becker, the conservation district's board chair, said the board doesn't want to antagonize the county commissioners but simply wants to promote discussion of the issue. “We don't want to fire darts,” Becker said. “We don't want to attack their policies. I know they get pressure (from all sides).”

But Becker said issues such as food supply need to be considered when development is discussed. “If you get rid of farmland, it's gone forever,” he said.

The county commissioners had questions and comments for Salzer when he delivered the conservation district's letter. Commissioner Ludlow said any development on the land in question would be years out. “We're 1,100 acres short of job-producing land,” he said. Commissioner Smith said farming requires a “whole host of behaviors” that young people don't want to engage in, and said much of the land under consideration is “fallow,” not actively farmed.

“It may be fallow at this time, but if you build on it, it's gone,” Salzer responded.

The current development proposal covers familiar ground about a lack of land for economic development. A bill introduced in the 2015 Oregon Legislature would have allowed Clackamas, Washington and Columbia counties to designate industrial reserves of up to 500 acres outside of established urban growth boundaries, but it died in committee.

This time, Clackamas County is going it alone and apparently will work through Metro.

Clackamas, Washington and Multnomah counties, which include the greater Portland area, agreed in 2010 to designate urban and rural reserves. Urban reserves will be considered first when the urban growth boundary is expanded for houses, stores and industries. More than 265,000 acres in the three counties were designated as rural reserves, meaning they would remain as farms, forests or natural areas until 2060.

“The facts on the ground have changed dramatically since the original reserves adoption,” the Clackamas commissioners said in a letter to Metro, “prompting the need for corresponding changes to reserve designations. We cannot pretend that those changes didn't happen, or allow the matter to be dismissed as simply a change in leadership.”