

Cities pan county's bid to change zoning of ag land

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Producers south of Wilsonville, Ore., grow nursery crops, Christmas trees, berries, vegetables and grain. Clackamas County commissioners, seeking more industrial and commercial land, want to review land-use designations in the area. Photo: Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

WILSONVILLE, Ore. — Clackamas County's bid to review the status of three land parcels now set aside for agriculture is a concern to farm groups, and the cities that would have to service new development aren't hot for the idea either.

Charlotte Lehan, a former county commissioner, former Wilsonville mayor and now member of the city council, said it would be "very difficult and very expensive" for the city to provide water and sewer to new development south of the Willamette River.

She said development in the area Clackamas County seeks to review would increase congestion on the Boone Bridge, which carries north-south Interstate 5 traffic across the river. She said a clogged bridge would be "disastrous" for the city. "I-5 is Wilsonville's lifeline," she said. "When the Boone Bridge isn't working, nothing works. We have to protect the functionality of Interstate 5."

The arguments back and forth are part of a long-running disconnect over Oregon's unusual statewide land-use planning system, which was designed to protect farm and forest land from urban sprawl. Under the system, cities are held in check by urban growth boundaries that can

be amended in a controlled manner. But development pressure at the edges of cities remains a continuing issue all over the state.

In the Portland area, land-use planning for Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties is done by Metro, which has an elected board. Seeking to end ceaseless arguments, the counties and Metro agreed to a system of urban and rural reserves that was intended to set growth patterns for 50 years.

Clackamas County's Board of Commissioners now wants to know whether three areas south and southeast of the Portland urban center, previously set aside as rural reserves and thus open to farming, would be more beneficial as "employment lands." The county commissioners cite a 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.

A majority of 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, outside Estacada. County officials believe the land should revert to "undesigned" rather than rural reserves.

County officials have dismissed concerns as overwrought. They point out that any land-use change would take years to accomplish and would be subject to legal review or appeal.

Nonetheless, the proposal has reopened a can of worms. Friends of French Prairie, a farming advocacy group, maintains that allowing development to jump across the Willamette River south of Wilsonville would crack open the state's prime agricultural areas.

In a guest editorial written for the Capital Press, Friends of French Prairie President Ben Williams questioned the validity of the county's employment lands report and some of the land is owned by people who have contributed heavily to commissioners' election campaigns.

Board members of the Clackamas Soil and Water Conservation District took the unusual step of publicly warning against a land-use change. "The District believes the County's current initiative to create employment lands may not adequately consider the long-term value of high-value farmland," the district said in a letter to Clackamas commissioners. "A significant amount of the land proposed for reconsideration as employment land is high-value farmland, an irreplaceable natural resource."

Lehan, the Wilsonville council member critical of the land-use review, said her fast-growing city has planned for additional industrial growth in its Coffee Creek and Salt Creek areas, and for residential development in an area called Frog Pond. The city doesn't need more "employment land," she said. "I know how development works and what it takes for a city to support it," Lehan said. "I'm not anti-growth by any means."

Lehan was Clackamas County board chair until defeated in 2012 by the current board chair, Commissioner John Ludlow, who is often critical of Metro and of Portland's influence on its suburban neighbors.

Canby City Administrator Rick Robinson made a point similar to Lehan's: the city has an existing industrial park that isn't full. The 400 acres Clackamas County wants to revert to undesigned

status is outside the city limits and outside the city's urban growth boundary, he said. Some of it is farmed now, and much of it is Class 1 agricultural soil, he said. Robinson said the Canby City Council hasn't taken a position on the Clackamas review proposal.

The third area considered by Clackamas County is outside the city of Estacada. The mayor and city manager were unavailable to discuss the issue.