

The rest of the story of a county's threat to farmland

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By Ben Williams

As a long time subscriber, I say “Kudos to the Capital Press” for publishing Eric Mortenson’s article on farmland development in Clackamas County (*Conservation district fights farmland development*; July 8, 2016). One county within Metro Portland, OR is a small part of the Capital Press’ publishing coverage, but this a story that merits consideration. Eric captured the essence of the matter: a local Soil & Water Conservation District is asking “what is going on?” And their concern is loss of irreplaceable farmland?”

The devil is in the detail, or a Paul Harvey used to say, in “the rest of the story!” This story has four or more chapters, and the first has to do with campaign contributions – but let’s skip the gory details for now. The second has to do with the reference 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, and overall shortage of up to 1,180 acres over the next 20 years.” Guess who hired the consulting firm and engaged them to do the study? The Clackamas County commissioners! They got the results they were looking for, and then they used the results of the study to issue a new County strategic plan in late 2014 which defined the need for employment lands and other development, but never involved any of the Cities in the County or any of the Community Planning Organizations within the County in the process or in the roll out of the new strat plan! Hire a consulting firm, get a study, issue a new strat plan. Very efficient, right?

As if that wasn’t enough, one year later, after publicly and privately playing a game of chicken with Metro (metro Portland’s tri-county planning body) by holding up the finalization of the Urban/Rural Reserves designations, they appropriated almost half a million dollars to “re-study” the Rural Reserves. This was presumably a settled matter, but their argument was that the County was short of “employment lands,” and the basis for the assertion? The study they had commissioned a year earlier.

To add insult to injury, on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the 4th of July holiday weekend they held Open Houses on the question of employment lands and re-studying the Rural Reserves to “seek public input.” The shocker was that none of the three Cities within the County in which the meetings were held (Canby, Wilsonville and Estacada) were given the courtesy of being notified of the meetings, nor was there any normal public notice: only the property owners immediately adjacent to the areas of study received a notice. The Mayor of Canby attended the Wilsonville meeting on Tuesday evening because he didn’t find out until Tuesday morning about the meeting in Canby on Monday evening! What’s the fuss? If ag land is rezoned for development and the local Cities have to provide the infrastructure like water, sewer and roads, what’s the big deal?

The fact is that Metro and others have put the “facts” on the table. There is more than enough “employment lands” within Metro and within Clackamas County to meet the development requirements of Oregon’s land use laws (a 50 year supply). The problem is that those employment lands aren’t where Chair Ludlow and Commissioner Smith want them. And, those employment lands aren’t owned by their major campaign contributors. So, this is crony capitalism at its best, compounded by a blatant attempt to avoid public involvement!

So then, the Soil and Water Conservation District’s concern is first and foremost one about what’s missing: transparency and public accountability! The consequence of that, in this case, is the loss of irreplaceable farm land. And, these kind of shenanigans probably aren’t just going on in one Metro County in Oregon!

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