

Metro area's 50-year growth plan wins state approval; designates urban and rural 'reserves'

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North of Cornelius, blueberry farmer Tim Duyck opposed the 50-year land-use designations.

It wasn't easy, took more than two years and it didn't please everyone, but a plan to shape the next 50 years of development and preservation in the tri-county Portland area was approved Friday by the state Land Conservation and Development Commission.

The commission, stifling the impulse to tinker, unanimously approved urban and rural reserves for Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties.

The unprecedented plan designates 28,256 acres of urban reserves, which will be considered first when the urban growth boundary is expanded for houses, stores and industries. Another 266,628 acres is designated as rural reserves, meaning it will remain as farms, forests or natural areas until 2060.

The tri-county work was coordinated by Metro, the regional government, and was intended to replace the bitter arguments that erupt every five years when Metro expands the urban growth boundary. By establishing reserves, the region makes it clear where growth will occur and how land will be used for decades to come.

Backers of the idea say it allows cities, school districts and utilities to make infrastructure decisions. Farmers could decide which crops to plant or equipment to buy. Property owners and businesses could plan investments.

"It's the first of its kind, the first time anyone has tried to do this in Oregon," said Metro Councilor Kathryn Harrington, who was among the elected officials who headed the project.

Washington County Commissioner Andy Duyck, whose county generated most heated urban and rural reserves debate, said the process required everyone to think regionally instead of concentrating on the fate of individual properties. "I'm extremely satisfied," Duyck said. "If I were the king there might have been different parcels (designated), but that's not what this is about."

Although approved by LCDC, the plan may be challenged in the courts.

The land-use watchdog group 1000 Friends of Oregon and the Washington County Farm Bureau strongly opposed the urban and rural designations in Washington County. They believe prime farmland in Helvetia and north of Cornelius was wrongly designated as urban reserves or as "undesigned," respectively.

Mary Kyle McCurdy, 1000 Friends policy director, said there are legal grounds to appeal the decision, but no decision has been made on whether to pursue them. She said officials are boasting about saving farmland in Washington County, but much of what was placed in rural reserves wasn't about to be developed anyway. "It's misleading to say we've done this wonderful thing, when no one expects those areas will be under any threat of urbanization," she said.

It was inevitable that fast-growing Washington County became the focus of the urban and rural reserves process. It is home to the state's biggest high-tech businesses, but it also has some of the state's best farmland.



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Farm groups believe too much land was designated for eventual urban development.

In the end, the agreement put nearly half of the region's urban reserve acreage in Washington County, meaning it will continue to have the most room to grow. But John VanLandingham, LCDC chairman, said the county set aside a surprising amount of farmland.

"The purpose of all this is the long-term protection of the best farmland, yet still allow the metro area to grow in a way that allows them to become great communities," he said.

"We all know Washington County is also ambitious in economic development, and they probably are the economic engine that provides most of the jobs for Oregon," VanLandingham said, but the county also "accomplished quite a bit in terms of preserving farmland."