

Metro Council faces decision on Stafford reserves

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Now it's up to the Metro Council — and Clackamas County commissioners — to resolve what land should be open to development in the next 50 years. After another round of arguments Thursday (Nov. 19), similar to those voiced at the first hearing Oct. 8, the Metro Council will schedule a work session for mid-December.

At issue is whether the Stafford Triangle — 6,230 acres bounded by Tualatin, Lake Oswego and West Linn — should be the sole area in Clackamas County designated as urban reserves. Metro's staff has recommended that the seven-member council reaffirm the decision the council and the county commissioners made back in 2011. The issue is up again as a result of a 2014 ruling by the Oregon Court of Appeals, which said that more evidence must be mustered to support that decision.

But the Clackamas County board, which expanded from three to five members in 2012, wants to reopen the issue to allow consideration of other areas for future development. Commissioners argue that things have changed since the original decision. "We want to reiterate that Clackamas County believes that a complete policy solution to these issues is necessary, and, accordingly, the county does not intend to limit its consideration solely to the Stafford area," said a letter signed by Chairman John Ludlow and read aloud by Commissioner Tootie Smith. The Stafford area contains about 25 percent of the urban reserves contemplated for development in the next 50 years.

Metro Council President Tom Hughes says the designation of urban and rural reserves dates back nearly a decade, when the Oregon Legislature empowered Metro and the three Portland area counties to start the process. "The purpose of those reserves was to give people long-term certainty about how they may invest — certainty about whether they can invest in an urban community or a longstanding family farm," Hughes says. "I think I speak for most of those involved that we'd like to bring this process to a conclusion and provide that long sought-after certainty."

Metro is in a "facilitated discussion" with Clackamas County and the cities of Tualatin, Lake Oswego and West Linn about how urban services can be extended to the largely undeveloped Stafford area. One more such meeting is planned. "I am hopeful we will see information about whether that meeting will have a chance at being productive," Hughes says.

The Metro Council action would be in the form of an ordinance. Hughes spoke after West Linn Mayor Russ Axelrod and Jeff Condit, a Portland lawyer speaking for West Linn and Tualatin, raised questions about the cost of higher-density development and the streets and other services required for it. "Our position is that the Stafford area is not appropriate for urban levels of development," Axelrod says.

Argument for more

Many of the arguments the council heard in its most recent hearing focused again on one area that Clackamas County commissioners want studied for potential development. The area, south of Wilsonville and south of the Willamette River, includes the Langdon Farms Golf Club owned by Chris and

Tom Maletis. But neither brother offered formal testimony at the second hearing — Chris Maletis did speak briefly at the Oct. 8 hearing — and commissioners say specific sites are not at issue, although a previous letter from them does specify three areas.

Chris Maletis filed a written statement that says in part: “We believe that it makes a great deal more sense for the rural reserve designation be removed from our property and put where it belongs ... Given Clackamas County’s extreme shortage of land set aside for job creation, we believe that assessment from those responsible individuals is correct.”

Commissioner Paul Savas says news accounts have focused too much on a single site and too little about the general availability of more land for affordable housing and growing businesses. “Here we are years later, after millions of dollars of taxpayer money has been spent, and we find ourselves engaged in a process where the public is not being made aware of the problem we are trying to solve,” Savas said. “We are not working together. The citizens of this region deserve better. This is not about a few hundred acres south of Wilsonville. This is not just about Stafford.... Yet the politics surrounding the south river and Stafford has drawn almost all the attention and overshadowed the real needs of our citizens.”

The other sites are 400 acres east of Canby and an area of unspecified size on Springwater Road southeast of Carver. The Nov. 10 letter signed by Ludlow and read by Smith said that many of the urban reserves originally designated by Metro and the counties in 2011 — including 4,300 acres in Boring — are not likely to be developed. (The adjacent city of Damascus will conduct another election on May 17 to decide whether that city will disincorporate.) “We believe it would be irresponsible to ignore this fact,” the letter said. “Clackamas County believes that the reserve designations adopted in 2011 ... are inadequate and cannot be adopted. Clackamas County is short on land for the future, particularly employment land.”

At the Oct. 8 hearing, Commissioner Jim Bernard dissociated himself from the majority and urged the Metro Council to proceed with reaffirming the 2011 designation of the Stafford Triangle.

Argument for one

Others who testified say that the problem is with the commissioners, not the process. “We are appalled that Clackamas County commissioners are putting the entire Metro reserves process at risk,” says Susan Hansen, specifically their support of studying the area south of Wilsonville.

Wilsonville city officials, including Councilor Charlotte Lehan at the latest hearing, have opposed any extension of city utilities south of the Willamette River. “You can’t do it for 400 acres; you have to have 4,000 or 40,000 acres,” Lehan says. “You’re on your way to Salem with urbanization. It’s not something you can do a little bit because it’s way too expensive.”

Much of that area is now designated as farmland off-limits to development. “It is of huge concern to us that Clackamas County commissioners want to ignore agriculture as a major and very stable economic force,” Hansen says. “Plenty of employment flows from rich agricultural land such as French Prairie.”

Mary Kyle McCurdy, staff attorney and policy director for the land-use watchdog group 1000 Friends of Oregon, says that a designation for the area other than as a rural reserve could not withstand a legal

challenge. "This area is in the heart of the most productive agricultural lands in this state," McCurdy says.

Charles Patterson lives in Charbonneau, south of Wilsonville. "Granting the county's request means reopening an immediate return to annual fights over the next piece of ground," he says.