

County failed in transparency over rural reserves

Wilsonville's Reader Opinions, Wednesday, 27 July 2016

Written by Jim Bernard

It's worse than "disingenuous."

That's the word used in a story by the Wilsonville Spokesman about the so-called "public process" that Clackamas County engaged in around three recent open houses. The subjects: changing the designation of properties from rural reserves to an undesignated status to allow them to be developed — making them far more valuable in the process.

The three properties at the heart of this effort include Langdon Farms south of the Willamette River, owned by the Maletis family; Springwater Road owned by Terry Emmert, and another 400 acres east of Canby. Despite the major impact on cities and residents, the three public open houses for citizens were scheduled the week before the Fourth of July holiday with short notice and only property owners within 250 feet of the proposed study area were notified. Affected cities, mayors, community planning organizations and hamlets all say they were not notified. They were outraged, and I agree with them.

Thanks to the quick actions by Friends of French Prairie and other community organizations in Wilsonville, approximately 400 people attended the three open houses. Only one person spoke in support of this proposal, Chris Maletis.

That shouldn't be a surprise. Thousands of citizens participated in the Urban/Rural Reserves process to preserve foundation farmland, prevent urban sprawl and give certainty to farmers and urban developers. After years of court challenges, the court ruled that areas south of the Willamette River were properly designated as foundation farmland. Instead of accepting the court's and the public's verdict, Clackamas County Chair John Ludlow and other commissioners voted to spend \$200,000 to study employment lands in areas that have already been decided — and that would benefit only a few property owners. At the same time, those same property owners have donated tens of thousands of dollars to the campaigns of the chair and those commissioners.

These properties are in the heart of agricultural land and have been rejected as urban land in all previous public processes. And for good reason: our citizens need jobs close to their communities where services already exist, not on virgin farmland down in the Willamette Valley, where communities do not have the infrastructure to support these industrial uses — and taxpayers would be on the hook for paying for them.

Why should this matter to all Clackamas County citizens? The Clackamas County Commission adopted five strategic priorities in Performance Clackamas, chief among these: Build public trust through good governance. This process does exactly the opposite.

I personally attended two of three open houses. No one I spoke with received notice from the county nor did I encounter even a single individual that supported the proposal. There is a work session that is scheduled on this subject on Aug. 3. While a vote is not usually called during a work session, there is nothing preventing that from happening if a majority of commissioners decide otherwise. That must not happen. Instead, we should restore the integrity of a process that has raised far too many questions — and far too few answers about who the County Commission is truly serving.

Jim Bernard is a Clackamas County Commissioner.