

Town joins farm preservation effort

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Kleckner cast lone dissenting vote, saying too much farmland is excluded from program in county's plan

The Belgium Town Board on Monday approved participating in the Ozaukee County Working Lands Initiative, the state's revised farmland preservation program.

The initiative provides income tax credits of \$7.50 per acre for land that yields an annual income of at least \$6,000.

Unlike, the farmland preservation program, there is no minimum acreage for participation or penalty for pulling out of the initiative. Farmers can receive the tax credit only if the town participates in the program.

Town Chairman Tom Winker and Supr. Bill Janeshek approved the initiative, which was unanimously recommended by the Plan Commission.

However, Supr. Francis Kleckner opposed it, saying too many acres currently being farmed, including 40 acres of his land adjacent to the Village of Belgium, have not been included in the designated areas.

Parcels were evaluated based on soil and land conditions, proximity to urban areas where sewer and water are available, the town's land-use map and proximity to permanently protected lands, Andrew Struck, Ozaukee County planning and parks director, told the board.

He presented a map that showed the excluded areas, although most are zoned for agriculture.

Land that was likely to be developed, including areas near the Village of Belgium and along Lake Michigan, received lower scores, while those adjacent to parks, nature preserves and federal Fish and Wildlife property got more points, Struck said.

"About 60% of the score was the type of soils," he said, noting some excluded areas are wetlands or wooded areas.

Other preservation incentives may be available for those property owners.

Kleckner said most farmers whose land is not in the initiative are probably unaware of that unless they attended a meeting where the map was presented.

"There are parcels that they picked out that are in the middle of a section that have been farmed for at least 50 years and will be for the next 50 years, but they don't qualify," said Kleckner, citing land owned by Herman Feyereisen and Gerald Gantner.

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“You can give one farmer some poor land and he can get just as good a crop as the farmer with good land. I guess they don’t give points for that.”

Anyone who wants to appeal the map designations can send a letter to the county planning department and it will be reviewed, Struck said.

“We had to develop criteria that could be used throughout the county,” he said.

Farmers who are not included in the initiative are encouraged to continue farming, but cannot receive tax credits, Struck said.

A group of farmers can request the state Legislature designate prime agriculture enterprise areas that are within the Working Lands Initiative boundaries, he said.

Farmers in the prime areas could receive \$10 per acre. The additional \$3.50 per acre may not be enough incentive for farmers to ask lawmakers to get involved, Struck said.

There is no penalty for dropping out of the program, but it is intended to be long term, Struck said.

“The county is charged with coming up with a proposal to preserve farmland,” he said, noting his department has been working for two years on the initiative.

The Town of Fredonia was to consider participating in the program Wednesday, Feb. 8.

The towns of Port Washington, Grafton and Saukville decided not to participate. Mequon and the Town of Cedarburg expressed some interest, Struck said.