

Town backs Paulus farm expansion

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Conditional use permit clears the way for family's plan to increase dairy herd to as many as 1,200 cows

The Fredonia Town Board unanimously approved a conditional-use permit last week for a large dairy operation on the farm operated by Mike and Lori Paulus, W2828 Meadowlark Rd.

At a previous meeting, Town Chairman Richard Mueller said the permit request was more of a procedural matter because the Paulus property is already zoned for agricultural use.

Still, more than 50 people crowded into the Fredonia Government Center meeting room on Wednesday for a public hearing on the plan.

Earlier this year, Mike Paulus spelled out the long-term expansion plans, which include the construction of two 62,000-square-foot freestall barns, a 30,000-square-foot special-needs barn and a milking parlor.

Within the next five to seven years, Paulus said, he would like to increase his dairy herd to 1,200 cows. The farm now milks more than 400 animals on the 420-acre farm.

The town permits spells out more than a dozen operational conditions that the farm must adhere to, including restrictions on such things as noise, odors, lighting and aesthetics.

The permit also notes that the town defers to the county's Planning, Resources and Land Management Office on water runoff and manure management, and state wastewater regulations.

The two-page permit went through several refinements, which immediately drew the attention of neighbor David Ware, who has been critical of the expansion.

"It strikes me as odd that we are just being given copies of this permit tonight," Ware said.

During the hour-long hearing, comments were pretty evenly divided in favor and in opposition to the expansion.

Supr. Jim Stemper said the permit process is a way for the town to get some assurances that the expansion takes place in a manner acceptable to the town.

"The conditional-use permit is for our benefit. They can expand their farm to 1,000 animal units (each cow is the equivalent of 1.4 animal units) and we can't do anything about it," Stemper said.

Once the herd exceeds 1,000 animal units, the farm falls under the regulation of the state, town officials repeatedly said.

That concept concerned Phil Steinke, who owns land near the Paulus property.

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“Are you saying you can’t put any kind of restriction on the operation even if he has 10,000 animal units?” Steinke asked.

Town Chairman Rich Mueller said the state keeps a close eye on large dairy operations, but the handling of animal waste would be critical in determining how large such a farm could grow.

“Where the limits will come in is his need to provide enough acreage for the spreading of that much manure,” Mueller said.

Saukville Town Chairman Barb Jobs challenged the hearing process, saying other large farms operate without conditional-use permits.

“There is something very wrong here, folks,” Jobs said.

Attorney Robert Feind, lawyer for the Paulus family, said the permit was requested because of the anticipated size of the farm.

“When you are talking about a conditional-use permit for a business like a convenience store, you set the requirements before it is built,” Feind said.

“It is the same situation here. You know a farm isn’t going to expand to 1,000 cows in the middle of the night.”

Much of hearing was dominated by testimonials from members of the farming community, who praised the Paulus dairy operation.

“The Paulus family has been farming in Ozaukee County for generations,” said county Supr. Rose Hass Leider.

“These people didn’t go out and build without getting a conditional-use permit. They went to the Plan Commission.

What else can they do? If you don’t think preserving farmland is important, why is the Department of Natural

Resources pushing so hard to buy development rights? Their plan is going to protect farmland in Ozaukee County.”

Meadowlark Road neighbor Frank Byrne supported the permit in a letter to Mueller.

“It’s great to see a couple of hard-working folks go for the gold and grow at a time when the economy is shaking,” Byrne wrote.

“Their growth will benefit all of us through increased tax revenue.”

Grafton Town Chairman Lester Bartel also spoke in favor of the Paulus permit.

Bartel said development pressure is strong in Ozaukee County, and tightly regulated waste-management plans for farms are better for the environment than urban growth.

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“I have yet to read about a dairy farm dumping millions of gallons of waste into the river when it rains,” he said. “You have deemed to make agriculture the business of the 21st century in this community.”