

Dairy operation would be largest in county

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Conditional-use permit from town needed for proposed 1,200-cow herd

Dairy farmer Mike Paulus appeared before the Town of Fredonia Plan Commission last week, detailing plans for a major expansion that could eventually result in a herd of 1,200 cows.

Mike and Lori Paulus have operated a dairy farm on Meadowlark Road just east of Highway 57 since 1975. The couple started with 33 cows and are now milking more than 400 animals.

Paulus told the commission he hopes to build three freestall barns and a new milking parlor.

“We’d like to grow into the project,” he told the commission, noting that the complete project will likely take five to seven years.

“We’ll see what the economy brings and how the herd grows. The plan is to take it step by step.”

If approvals can be secured, Paulus said he would like to start construction on the first freestall barn this fall, so cows could be moved in the spring of 2011.

That first barn would be 62,000 square feet, large enough for 500 cows. Eventually, a second 62,000-square-foot barn would be built, along with a 30,000-square-foot “special needs” barn.

Once the freestall barns are in place, the existing barns will be used for young stock, Paulus said.

The roughly 15,000-square-foot milking parlor will also represent a marked upgrade on the farm.

“Our milking parlor is 33 years old and it has run out of life,” Paulus said.

A draft plan showed entry to the new dairy complex from a second driveway on Meadowlark Road, however, Paulus said orientation of the buildings could be changed on the 420-acre parcel.

Uncertainty about high-tension electrical lines over the property could play a large role in determining the location of the buildings, he said.

“For us, this is an ideal location but we could turn the buildings or relocate them,” Paulus said.

Although formal plans were not presented to the commission for action, Paulus used the meeting to lay the foundation for future consideration.

“In today’s world, 1,200 cows is not that big. We are planning for the future. We need to think about being bigger if I am going to be able to pay my employees so they can support their families,” he said.

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Even though the Paulus land has agricultural zoning, a conditional-use permit would be required for such a large operation.

The farm would also fall under the control of the state, once the state's formula determines more than 1,000 animal units are being raised. That formula equates one cow to 1.4 animal units.

Using that formula, Paulus said his farm already had about 800 animal units so any meaningful expansion would push it over the limit where state regulations kick in.

Manure hauling and wastewater management for the operation would also be subject to strict permitting from the state, although Paulus said the animal waste could be easily handled.

Paulus said he farms large tracts of cropland in the towns of Fredonia and Saukville, and neighboring farmers are willing to pay \$60 an acre to spread his manure on their land.

"I don't think I'll run out of places to go with manure. Cash croppers realize the value of manure. It is very valuable. Spreading manure can cut use of chemical fertilizers by half," Paulus said.

He said the additional truck traffic, hauling feed and milk to and from the farm, could take its toll on Meadowlark Road, which is already showing wear.

Paulus asked the town to consider putting money into improving the road, paralleling that kind of budgeting decisions he makes on the farm.

"I can't put off putting money into my trucks or eventually they will end up as junk," he said.

Town Chairman Richard Mueller, a dairy farmer, said the large size of the operation is not daunting.

"You see more and more small guys dropping out of farming, but someone has to provide the food," he said.

"I don't see any opposition on this board. It would certainly be nice to add to the tax base. The review by the town could take a couple months at the most, but there may be a lot more time with the county and state."

Town officials will check the requirements other communities have used in issuing conditional-use permits to large-scale farms.