

Farmers leery of program

Written by Mark Jaeger
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Town chairman says there's little local interest in state preservation plan

Budget jockeying in Madison has left the fate of some aspects of the Working Lands Initiative in doubt, but that doesn't concern Town of Saukville officials.

Andrew Struck, director of Ozaukee County's Planning and Parks Department, gave town officials an update on the status of Wisconsin's farmland preservation program at Monday's Plan Commission meeting.

Struck said one of the more dramatic changes under Gov. Scott Walker's proposed biennial budget is the elimination of funding for the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program, which would have paid rural landowners to surrender development rights to their acreage.

He said the more familiar component of the farmland preservation program that offers tax credits for land kept in agricultural does not appear to be in danger under the proposed state budget.

However, to qualify for the credits, land must be within a designated farmland protection area. Currently, there are no such areas within the Town of Saukville.

Struck said only the towns of Fredonia and Belgium have designated farmland preservation areas.

The Town of Saukville's apparent shortcoming is of little concern to Town Chairman Barb Jobs, who has been an active member of the county's comprehensive planning advisory committee.

Realizing the town would have to make specific land-use designations if local farmers want to participate in the preservation program, Jobs said she has made a point of seeking their input.

"I've made an attempt to contact all of our local farmers. I know of five who told me they don't want anything to do with the program and no one has told me they want to be involved," Jobs said.

She said rural landowners see the state program as being too restrictive, with participating farmers bound to farmland preservation rules for 10 years.

The most recent listing of farmers in the preservation program dates to 2005, when 30 town landowners were receiving tax credits.

Of that number, Jobs said five landowners have died.

"To my knowledge, there is no one collecting the credits at this time," she said.

Struck said one of the most onerous components of the Working Lands Initiative, the charging

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of a land-conversion fee for zoning changes made within agricultural district, is expected to be scrapped by the governor.

Jobs said the state should realize there is a better way to encourage farmers to keep their land in production than by offering restrictive preservation programs.

“Taxing farmers based on land use is the best way to preserve farmland,” she said.