

Town chairman asks farmers to speak up on land program

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Working Lands Initiative would require local change

Saukville Town Chairman Barb Jobs renewed her plea last week to local farmers for input on the state's revamped farmland preservation program.

Starting next year, the Working Lands Initiative goes into effect, requiring rural communities to designate key agricultural areas for protection from development.

In exchange for the designation, landowners will be able to voluntarily take advantage of tax credits which in Ozaukee County will come to \$7.50 an acre.

Before local farmers can take advantage of the program, Andrew Struck, Ozaukee County's planning and parks director, told the Town Board and a handful of rural landowners that the town needs to adjust its comprehensive land-use plan.

The problem, Struck said, is the town's plan allows five-acre lots by zoning. That parcel threshold is too small, according to the state program.

Instead, Struck told officials they could adjust their plan to establish a conditional-use process to create five-acre lots.

"That would satisfy the state and accomplish the same thing. In fact, the conditional-use approval would give the town more purview," he said.

Jobs said the provision for five-acre lots was deliberate, as an effort to prevent rural landowners from having to sell 35-acre parcels to someone looking to build a single house in the country.

"The intention is to keep as much land in agriculture as possible in the town. The greatest tool we have to preserve farmland is the use tax, which taxes owners based on what they are using their land for," she said.

Struck said that goal fits perfectly with the Working Lands Initiative, which designates sections of contiguous farmlands eyed for preservation based on location and LESA (or Land Evaluation and Site Assessment) score.

The greatest perceived drawback to the preservation program — a conversion fee that would have been assessed to rural landowners who withdrew land from the program — has been eliminated under the revamping directed by Gov. Scott Walker's administration.

Based on local land values, that fee would have been \$800 to \$1,000 an acre.

"In my opinion, as the law exists today, there isn't a downside. The upside is you are eligible for the tax credits and you have the option to drop out," Struck said.

Without the conversion fee, the state no longer has the revenue source that was going to pay

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for the purchase of agricultural easements, although the program still exists on paper.

The county hopes to have farmland protection areas designated throughout the county by the end of the year.

That timetable could be difficult to meet with communities like the Town of Saukville still on the fence.

“We have been trying to contact farmers who participated in the program in the past, and they have told us they aren’t interested or they haven’t responded,” Jobs said.

“I have had no one come forward saying they want it. The concern seems to be whether the funding will be there.”

Jobs said she would accept input from local farmers through the end of the month on whether they are interested in taking part in the preservation program.

Interested landowners are asked to express that interest in writing, including tax key numbers and the amount of acreage involved.

“The town doesn’t have an opinion on this, it comes down to what the landowners want,” said Supr. Kate Smallish.

Struck said the towns of Grafton and Cedarburg have already opted out of the program, while Port Washington and Fredonia are considering it.