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Officials say qualifying for tax credits should not be reason for participation

Town of Saukville officials have long touted their commitment to protecting local agriculture, but that was not enough to get them to buy into the land-use implications of the state's revised farmland preservation program.

JEFF OPITZ, OWNER of the Opitz Dairy Farm on Highway I, tried to convince Town of Saukville officials to participate in the state's revised farmland preservation program. The program offers tax incentives to landowners who keep their properties in farming.
Photo by Mark Jaeger

The Town Board followed last week's recommendation from the Plan Commission, and voted unanimously Tuesday against participating in the state's Working Lands Initiative.

The stand did not come without some heated debate, especially during commission deliberations.

Under the state program, landowners are entitled to tax credits if they agree to keep their land in farming for 35 years. To be eligible for the credits, municipalities have to designate farmland preservation zoning districts that in turn have to be accepted by the state.

Communities in Ozaukee County have been lukewarm on the program, with the towns of Port Washington and Grafton choosing not to participate.

Town Chairman Barb Jobs has been equally leery of the restrictions of the farmland program, and the insinuation that land earmarked for the designation is expected to stay in farming for the long term.

"The point that has been stressed over and over again is that this program is not about providing tax credits to farmers, but about planning for our future," Jobs told the Plan

Commission.

“We have been told to look at farmland designations as being into perpetuity. We shouldn’t be looking at this as something people can enroll in, and then get out of when they want.”

Four town property owners expressed interest in having their land included in the farmland program, although only one of those landowners — Jeff Opitz — is a town resident.

Opitz spoke passionately in support of the preservation program at the commission meeting.

“I like the program because it sends the message, ‘I am here to stay.’ Why not put the zoning in place?” he asked.

“I’ve got $12 million invested in this business. Am I going to pull out? Give me a break.”

Commission member Tom Ravn said it is exactly that point, giving farmers a financial break in the form of a tax credit, that makes the farmland preservation program appealing.

“I’ve been vacillating back and forth on what position to take on this. We have local surveys, where time after time people have said they want the town to preserve open spaces and farmland,” Ravn said.

“How do we accomplish that without taking the steps we can to incentivize it?”

Ravn said farmers today face stringent economic pressures.

“You have to run a pretty tight ship to be financially viable,” he said.

Commission member Tom Uttech also backed the program and its goal of offering a financial incentive to farmers who keep their land in agriculture.

“I strongly support us participating. I don’t see any downside. Adopting this would encourage agriculture without causing any harm,” Uttech said.

Supr. Kate Smallish, a member of the commission, said the restrictions on land use are enough to give her second thoughts about the program.

“Leaving things as they are, there is nothing that says farmers can’t continue to keep their land in farming. This program is looked at by farmers basically as just a way to add income,” Smallish said.

“I think what we are saying is tht this how the town is going to look for the next 35 years … I don’t know if I can back that.”

The commission rejected a motion to participate in the farmland preservation program, with Ravn and Uttech casting the only votes in favor.

The panel then voted 4-2 to reject the state initiative, with the same two commission members voting in the minority.

“There was only one town resident who was interested in being part of the program, but even he wasn’t ready to make a commitment,” Jobs said.

“It came down to a question of whether this is what we see for the future of the Town of Saukville, essentially shutting down the entire township to growth.”