

Town braces for farmland program

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Officials concerned that rural landowners may be unaware of state's new Working Lands Initiative

Town of Saukville officials have prided themselves on taking deliberate steps to preserve farming, but that resolve may be tested by a new state program.

Andrew Struck, Ozaukee County's director of planning and parks, gave the town Plan Commission an introductory lesson last week on the Working Lands Initiative, which is being administered by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

It replaces the obsolete Farmland Preservation Program, which dates to 1981 and was characterized by Struck as "woefully out of date."

The program makes landowners eligible for tax credits issued by the state in exchange for assurances that prime farmland in participating towns will be kept in agriculture.

Once a parcel is included in a farmland preservation district, the landowners can claim an annual tax credit of \$7.50 per acre. Statewide, \$27 million in tax credits will be available through the program.

As was the case with previous farmland preservation efforts, participation is voluntary, Struck said.

However, he said "the stick" of the new program is that participants face a substantial penalty — deemed a conversion fee — if they choose to have their certified agricultural land rezoned.

That fee will be between \$700 and \$1,000 an acre, Struck said. The fee is determined by the Department of Revenue based on the state's appraisal of the land's assessed value.

The conversion fee is not charged if the land is sold but remains in agricultural use.

What concerned commission members, however, was the provision that landowners included in a farmland preservation district are subject to the conversion fee even if they have not requested tax credits.

Because of heavy development pressure, Ozaukee County is one of the first in the state expected to put the Working Lands Initiative into effect. The county plan must be in place by December 2011.

"It is a long process, but we need to get the word out to people as best we can," Struck said.

Designating farmland preservation areas will require all towns to amend their 2035 comprehensive land use plans.

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Town officials said they would cooperate with the county in promoting information meetings on the program.

Taking matters one step further, the town expects to contact all owners of exclusive agricultural land, explaining the benefits and restrictions of the program.

The initiative offers additional tax incentives to owners of large parcels included in Agricultural Enterprise Areas and also offers matching state funds to purchase agricultural conservation easements.

Commission member Tom Ravn said the financial nuances of the initiative could be critical to town landowners, and said the town must do what it can to spread the word about the program.

“If we don’t get this information out there, we are going to have a real can of worms here,” Ravn said.

While discussing the program with the Town Board this week, Town Chairman Barb Jobs said it is critical that the designation of agricultural lands be done right.

“We are talking about something that will be in effect almost into perpetuity. The last plan was in place for 30 years,” Jobs said.