

Future of farming in the 'burbs raises quite the ruckus

By DAVID PETERSON, Star Tribune

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The jam-packed public hearing late last month objecting to a plan to slowly close out the practice of farming in most of Scott County in the decades to come is getting results.

Since then, the county's senior managers have agreed to begin talks with advocates of small-scale, locally grown food to see whether that new form of farming can coexist with a rapidly suburbanizing county.

"I truly believe there will be farmland here 150 years from now," county Administrator Dave Unmacht said Tuesday. "The question is what will it look like. We need to sit down and work it out."

The clock is ticking for counties and cities to submit new long-range plans to the Metropolitan Council by the end of this year. That timeline, Unmacht said, creates "urgency but no panic" around finding solutions.

The last major public hearing on the plan, on March 27, drew about 100 people, of whom 20 spoke out. Many addressed the future of farming, saying that priorities in society are shifting toward a desire for superfresh, locally grown products rather than ones that need to be trucked in from states like California.

In the wake of that hearing, County Board members are considering taking part in a tour to see what sort of smaller-scale, cutting-edge farming is taking place around the county.

"Do I understand all the farming taking place in this county?" Commissioner Jon Ulrich, of Savage, asked his colleagues during Tuesday's board meeting. "No."

The county's planning manager, Brad Davis, said in an interview that officials are in the early stages of creating a farm advisory group.

"We're just sorting out who makes up the group, what its mission is and what we can accomplish with them," he said.

Jennifer Jensen, a leader of a group called the Local Harvest Alliance, said she's optimistic that something can be worked out.

"One option we're looking at is identifying where the best soils are and trying to keep ag where it makes the most sense," she said. "It's all sort of swirling about right now, but we're trying to put together some scenarios."

Davis said the meetings would have to make clear to farming advocates the challenges in trying to mingle farming and homes.

"It's an issue I struggle with," he said. "And what do we do about the efficiency of

extending services?" -- meaning the costs created, for instance, if costly sewer lines have to be extended under or around farming areas.

But it's worth making the attempt, he said.

"Maybe if we get in front of the advisory group and start addressing these issues and all the different ramifications, I'll be educated too, and find that it's maybe more compatible than I think."

Officials may be surprised when they take a field trip and find out what's going on, Jensen said.

"We can take them to one farm where the water in the creek is cleaner as it leaves their land than it is when it arrives," she said. "If that doesn't speak to a new form of organic, sustainable farming, I don't know what does."

The county needs to have an open mind as to the future of farming, Unmacht said.

"We could be seeing a redefinition of what a 'farm' is," he said. "The word 'farm' may not be the same in 25 years as it is today. We may be moving from feedlots to 'food lots.'"

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