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Group revs up effort to preserve farmland in Scott County

By **DAVID PETERSON**, Star Tribune

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A grass-roots group that is fighting to stop the phaseout of farming in most of Scott County is suddenly adopting a more aggressive tone.

With just weeks to go before the deadline for the county to submit its 20-year plan to the Metropolitan Council, the coalition's leaders have called in a "legal action group" and are seeking to have the whole process delayed.

The county's planning manager, Brad Davis, who has been working with the group in a search for common ground, called the latest turn of events "a bit of a surprise" -- and said the county is not inclined to ask for an extension.

But he also acknowledged that the issues the group's leaders are raising -- such as the desire to preserve prime farmland close to the metro area -- are quickly rising in the consciousness of the planning community. Just over a week ago, they were the topic of one of the headline sessions of the annual convention of the Minnesota chapter of the American Planning Association.

In Scott County, the effort to slow down suburbanization is being led by the Local Harvest Alliance, a group of producers and consumers of locally grown food whose members dominated an evening-long public hearing on the plan in March.

The group says too much of the county's prime farmland would be lost to commercial and residential development under the plan, and it questions whether there will truly be enough demand for more housing in light of the industry's slump.

They have now called in a St. Paul-based organization called FLAG, the Farmers Legal Action Group, which has assembled a document critiquing what the county has done so far. In summary, said Jennifer Jambor, a staff attorney with FLAG, "There hasn't been adequate public input on this plan, nor has the county considered the impact of it on agricultural land."

Jennifer Jensen, one of the Local Harvest organizers, said she doesn't understand what the rush is.

"Why are they trying to push this through when they could ask for an extension?" she said. "Let's do this right the first time. This all should have been looked at before they went public with it."

Davis said the Met Council's deadlines are driving the process.

"The council has asked all government units to submit their plans by the end of the year," he said, "and that's still the county's goal. We'd even like to have it in by November or early December. There is a process for communities to ask for an extension, but we've never explored that as a possibility."

The approval of a sweeping overall plan would be followed by a process of writing more detailed zoning rules, Davis said, and that process could be a chance for Local Harvest and its sympathizers to weigh in and influence the shape of the county's future.

The Scott County Board and senior managers have seemed receptive to the group's concerns. They took a tour last summer of both conventional and organic farming operations and offered to hold a major forum to discuss the issue and create an advisory board for ongoing advice. They say they always intended to treat prime farmland as worth saving, much like natural areas.

But grass-roots advocates say they fear that machinery is grinding into place that will make that very difficult to realize in practice, and they are reaching out to townships and surrounding counties for support in contesting the plan.

Local Harvest wants to meet with county leaders to offer suggestions about how the comprehensive plan should read. There has been no decision on that request, Davis said, "but there is some openness to it."

Still, he said he expects that "the 2030 plan will move forward as recommended by staff and the planning commission. Between now and mid-October we will hear comments from townships and cities, and none so far has raised this as an important issue."

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