

Waupaca County Conservation Easement Donation Program marks first year

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TOWN OF BEAR CREEK

Agriculture and forestry have long been important to the economy of Waupaca County, and residents throughout the county have made it clear they want those two vibrant industries to remain strong far into the future.

Currently, agricultural land, other open land and forests comprise nearly 84 percent of the county's landscape. According to the most recent data, agriculture has an economic impact of \$438 million, while forestry contributes \$110 million to the local economy.

"Broad public input during recent countywide planning showed more than three-quarters of all county residents, both urban and rural, agree that protecting farmland and forestland is essential to sustaining our local agriculture economy, rural character and wildlife habitat," said Greg Blonde, Waupaca County agriculture Extension agent.

To help eligible landowners continue to use their land and protect it from development, the Waupaca County Board enacted the Voluntary Conservation Easement Donation Ordinance in May 2009. "This is a voluntary contract between a landowner and the county that protects the land's resource value and permanently limits the use of the property," Blonde explained. "The easement is recorded by the register of deeds and is binding on all current and future owners of the property."

To mark the one-year anniversary of the program, an open house was

held on the Bob and Penny Leder farm on County Road T in the town of Bear Creek, who along with Jim and Mary Hlaban, of Waupaca, and Carl and Nancy Lantz, of Scandinavia, donated conservation easements totaling 150 acres in cropland and woods.

Following lunch that was provided by the county Conservation Easement Commission, Blonde and Mike Koles, University of Wisconsin Extension community development educator, highlighted aspects of the 10-year process that led to the passage and implementation of the ordinance and the county's comprehensive land-use plan.

Blonde noted that in the early years of this decade Waupaca County was among the first to utilize the state grant program to begin land-use planning and that proceeds from the county's successful Wisconsin Farm Technology Days in 2003 helped fund a countywide survey. "We learned that Waupaca County was losing farmland at a rate higher than our neighbor, and more urban, Outagamie County," he said.

"People weren't talking about having no growth or development," Blonde emphasized. "They wanted strategic growth, looking at ag and nonag development in a way that would allow agriculture and forestry to flourish, while also allowing for residential, commercial and industrial development."

"We had 33 of the 34 towns, villages and cities in the county partner in this new comprehensive planning. We had local folks cooperating in one of the best planning efforts in the state," Koles recalled. "In the middle

of that process we set our goals and then began to ask ourselves how were we going to achieve them."

Those questions led to a series of land-use study tours, starting in 2006, that took county residents to farms in Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania to find out how these states were protecting agricultural land while providing for orderly growth.

"We had nearly 50 local businesses and individuals contribute over \$20,000 to help defray the cost of transporting 50 people by planes and buses on these tours," Blonde said. "We learned from the people who had not only developed comprehensive plans but also identified the tools to implement those plans, particularly the conservation easement program."

Blonde pointed out that conservation easements offer landowners several advantages:

- The property remains privately owned and can be sold, rented or willed to heirs.
- Most management decisions remain with the landowner, including whether to allow public access.
- Income and estate taxes can be reduced because a donated easement is considered to be a charitable deduction.
- Barns and other ag and forestry buildings can be constructed and maintained.
- Plans are flexible and can be written to reflect the needs and vision of each donor, and may also allow for future residential homes that the land's resource value is protected.

The conservation easement pro-

gram also received funding from fees paid to the county by the American Transmission Co. when it constructed a high-voltage power line in the eastern part of the county earlier in the decade.

"Money from those fees was used to help offset costs to the three donating landowners for appraisals, survey work and attorney fees," Blonde explained. "There's a lot involved in donating these easements, so having those grant funds available to eliminate financial barriers was critical. Currently, we still have funds left for landowners who want to participate in the program."

The Leders raise sheep on their 80-acre farm in the town of Bear Creek, with 74 acres enrolled in the conservation easement program. Observing all the new homes that have popped up in the middle of farm fields over the last two decades helped them decide to participate in the program.

Jim and Mary Hlaban, long proponents of land trusts and conservation easements, acknowledged that the grant funds led them to donate an easement on their woodland. Desiring to protect their farmland near the village of Scandinavia led Carl and Nancy Lantz to participate in the program.

Having the conservation easement program in place also put Waupaca County in an ideal position to submit applications for several farms in the first round of the state Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program that provides up to 50 percent funding for landowners that are accepted, Blonde said. "Our county is one of only three or four in the state qualified to submit applica-



The first three families to enroll land in the Waupaca County Conservation Easement Donation Program are Bob and Penny Leder, left, Mary and Jim Hlaban, and Nancy and Carl Lantz. The families were honored during a special open house June 9 on the Leder farm.

(Photo by Dan Hansen)

tions," he added.

Applications for six Waupaca County farms, totaling 3,500 acres have been submitted for the PACE program. They include Turner's Fresh Market west of Waupaca, the Brooks and Bartels farms in the town of Lind south of Waupaca, Sandy-Valley Farms near Scandinavia, and dairy farms owned by Doug and Mary

Behnke, and Don and Diane Konrad in the town of Bear Creek.

"These six farms have worked with the county over the last six weeks to get those applications completed by the June 1 deadline," Blonde remarked. "Now we'll wait to see if any of them score high enough to be accepted into this competitive statewide program."



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