

Ways to grow county farming topic of meeting

Michael Andersen Columbian staff writer

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A group of local farm advocates thinks Clark County should buy up more open land and lease it out for crops and grazing. That's one of a bushel of ideas they think could help nurture a new generation of farmers in the area.

Other concepts include lowering the standards for farm-related tax benefits, loosening rules about the size and inventory of roadside produce stands and hiring a full-time "farmbudsman" to cut red tape for agricultural entrepreneurs.

The county will present the committee's ideas at a public open house in Ridgefield tonight. Public comments will be accepted until Nov. 17.

"A lot of people my age or younger would rather be outside and work in nature than work in a coffee shop," said David Knaus, 31, at an open house Monday in Brush Prairie.

Knaus moved to Clark County last winter to raise organically grown produce on 3 acres he rents near La Center. But he said would-be farmers like him need help finding affordable **farmland** and the skills to grow things on it.

To pay for such new preservation programs, county program manager Pat Lee said, the county might need to ask voters for a tax hike such as a levy lid lift.

Lorrie Conway, who raises 40 to 50 goats and sheep on her 5-acre farm outside Camas, said she hopes taxpayers are willing to preserve "a lifestyle that is diminishing."

Local governments should act to keep local food and fibers available to consumers, she said.

"There's a growing group of people that's very important to," said Conway, 43, a fourth-generation farmer who also works full-time as an accountant.

Label for local food?

Conway is one of 12 people on an agricultural preservation advisory committee formed by the county last winter. Their full list of recommendations is online at www.clark.wa.gov/legacylands/projects.html.

Conway hopes the county will boost its requirements for warning home

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buyers, when they move in near a farm, about county laws that protect farmers' rights to create noises and smells as they do their jobs.

"Not everybody's a cheerleader for local food," she said. "Some of the stuff that it takes to provide that food is less than appealing."

Ideas floated by the committee include:

n Branding locally raised farm products with a "Clark County Fresh" logo.

n Creating a way for farmers to get cash for their land by promising not to develop it.

n Lowering the requirements for a farm to receive a tax break; annual income of \$1,500 for a farm of 5 acres or less is currently required.

The committee's yearlong effort has been funded in part by a \$25,000 state grant. Lee said Tuesday that the county will put in "quite a bit more" of its own cash by the end of the year.

Some of the committee's ideas, Lee said, might help the county win further state grants to help with land-purchase programs. This year, the state gave out \$4.4 million in **farmland** preservation grants, none of it to Clark County.

Lee hasn't formally begun estimating annual costs for any of the committee's pricier ideas, such as a "farmbudsman."

"If you include a full-time position with benefits, etc., you're probably talking \$110,000 or so," Lee speculated Monday.

The committee's report is due by the end of the year. Lee hopes the state will extend that deadline until January, when the proposals can be reviewed by Clark County's incoming board of commissioners.

If you go

What: Open house to discuss ideas for nurturing local agriculture.

When: 6 to 8 p.m. today. Where: Clark County Public Safety Complex, 505 N.W. 179th St., Ridgefield.

Information: Pat Lee, 360-397-2375 ext. 4070.

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