

Community-Driven Review of Thurston County Ag Policies and Programs

From: **Nathaniel Jones** <nkhl@comcast.net>

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To county.commissioners@co.thurston.wa.us Copy Laurel.Lodge@comcast.net and 5 others

On behalf of The League of Women Voters of Thurston County, a small committee has been monitoring the efforts of the Thurston County Ag Advisory Committee. We are taking this opportunity to share our support of this on-going work in conjunction with your May 13 staff update on the effort. We ask that, as you consider potential changes to policies and programs, that you hold a broad perspective on the range of benefits that our community gains from having successful local farms.

We commend the Commissioners and staff for launching this review process. The Thurston community's response to the recently completed Ag Survey clearly demonstrates that agricultural policies and programs are quite significant to residents. Moreover, it shows that we are at a point in time when re-visioning our stance on these matters is warranted.

We concur with many of the early findings of the Ag Advisory committee and assert that we must establish far-more effective ways to stop the rapid loss of productive farmland. Currently, we are not meeting the goals of the County's Comprehensive plan; instead, we are allowing a vital local industry to slip away, without reasonable hope of return.

Current work by the Thurston Regional Planning Council, which considers the findings of the Buildable Lands Report, is also associated with the 2025 Comprehensive Plan update. This TRPC effort meshes well with the review of agricultural policies and programs. You can expect a briefing on the TRPC initiative on April 19.

Some key recommendations from the TRPC process include:

- Supporting strategies to preserve natural resource lands, including those used for agriculture, forestry, and existing natural resource uses,
- Considering whether future residential density will support new rural commercial centers,
- Continuing to work toward the Sustainable Thurston land use goals, while acknowledging that we may need a longer timeframe than 2035 to achieve the targets,
- Adopting strategies to advance Sustainable Thurston goals in the next round of Comprehensive Plan updates, and
- Evaluating the implications of missing the land use targets in Sustainable Thurston for the region's climate mitigation goals.

Stopping the loss of farmland requires that we view farming as a viable career path. Unless and until farming is economically sustainable, we can be confident that farmlands will continue to be subjected to intense pressure for conversion to other uses.

We believe that Thurston County can and should do more to meet its stated goals. There is evidence that this is possible. Other counties in Western Washington have achieved far-better results than Thurston. Practices from other parts of the country can be applied here for better results.

Commercial agriculture has a place in Thurston County and there are economic benefits gained from keeping it strong. We expect that you will hear this message from the Ag Advisory Committee, and we agree.

For the many benefits that farmers provide to our community, farmland owners should receive support from strategies that recognize the economic relationship between farmers and land, including tax policies. Since owning farmland is typically a farmer's retirement and health-crisis resource, farmland must provide an adequate return on investment when farmers are ready to leave the active workforce. Accordingly, the county will need policy and program changes that successfully address the high cost of farmland for the next generation of farmers. Farmland ownership is not just an investment in property, but in the sustainability of our future. County residents recognize that farmers' investments in sustainable agriculture create value for everyone.

As we move forward together in crafting responsive and responsible agricultural policies, we urge you to hold onto a broad perspective; one which considers the full range of benefits that our communities gain from the success of local farmers. Some of the outcomes of importance at this time include establishing farming's role in advancing local racial equity and environmental justice goals, and the role of farms in enhancing water quality and addressing climate change challenges.

Thank you for your attention to this important set of issues and opportunities,

Nathaniel Jones,
League Committee Member
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Additional resources and input for the Ag Review

From: **Sandler & Seppanen** <laurel.lodge@comcast.net>

5/12/2021 1:21 PM

To jennifer.davis@co.thurston.wa.us **Copy Nathaniel Jones** and 3 others

Jennifer,

The LWV ad hoc committee on the ag review has been looking at two topics we want to share with you:

1. The National Young Farmers Coalition's Land Policy report attached that brings equity issues to the farmland preservation conversation. For at least the past decade the Coalition has been a leader in analysis of actions that keep farmland in production and affordable to the next generation of farmers. This report focuses on land use policy recommendations at the national, state and local level. Our group found these four local items of interest for the Thurston ag review:
 - **Zone for food production** - When creating additional LTA type land use categories, the highest protections could be for land that is and/or will be used for food production, that is exclusive of land for sod, silviculture, Christmas trees, and the like. Protecting non-food farmland is also of value and could have different levels of zoning protection.

- **Long-term lease requirement for leased Ag Open Space Tax Status:** To help younger farmers who must lease land (due to the high cost of buying land) the Coalition recommends a county open space type tax program requirement a longer-term lease on the land if the land is leased to a farmer. The language would set a specific contract minimum such as five years to assure secure land tenancy and ability of farmer to use environmental sound practices. In our area, every year I hear another sad tale of a younger farmer losing leased land on short notice under the typical year or two-year lease arrangements.
 - **Advocate for urban land for ag** – this could happen in the joint Tumwater plan under review right now.
 - **The public value of climate resilient farmland.** Create climate resilient land banks where the “banked” term means that privately owned lands are thought of as public infrastructure for local food production, in addition to being private property of the landowner.
2. News about the PSRPC work to explore a regional approach to TDR: At the January 28 Puget Sound Regional Planning Council meeting an hour was devoted to exploring the possibility of creating a regional, rather than a county-based, TDR system based on the King County model. The King County model involves a TDR bank run by the county, a revolving loan process that needs extra \$ added due to friction in the system. King county created the loan fund with upfront Conservation Futures dollars. The farmer is paid for development rights without having a city buyer. County staff facilitate finding a buyer then uses that payment to replenish the revolving loan fund, minus a little cash. Pierce County says that would be great for them as they are too small (Tacoma!) to do TDR effectively. Thurston County has a liaison from the TRPC to PSRPC, who could be urged to find out if Thurston County could join the regional work. Cynthia Pratt (Lacey City Council) is the TRPC liaison to PSRPC. Thurston county farmers are critical food suppliers to King and Pierce Counties (Kirsop Farm, Stoney Plains, Rising River, Helsing Junction, Colvin Ranch and other beef producers, for example.) For the PSRPC discussion see https://psrc2.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=1&clip_id=232 - look for agenda item 8. Below are two slides from that presentation.

Another item of interest to me is to learn more about why economic development related to agriculture is outside the focus of this ag review. The Comp Plan includes an entire chapter on economic development. In some counties Ag economic development policies are featured in that chapter. Thurston County should and could reconsider the ag economic development policies as part of this review.

Loretta Seppanen