

TO: Bill Vetter, Pierce County Council Performance Audit Committee
FROM: Barney & Worth Inc.
DATE: August 23, 2016
SUBJECT: A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture
Summary of Stakeholder Survey

Introduction

A multi-disciplinary team led by Barney & Worth, Inc. is taking *A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture*. Members of the team bring extensive agricultural, scientific, legal, and economic expertise to the project.

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires counties to designate Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL), which “have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products.” Pierce County places a high priority on protecting commercially viable agricultural lands, and has established these criteria for ARL parcels:

- Located in rural area of County (outside UGA)
- Five acres or greater
- Contain at least 50% “prime farmland” soils
- Grass/legume production yield of 3.5 tons per acre or greater
- 50% of abutting parcels larger than 1 acre
- Landowner may request the designation

The consultant team is analyzing the current condition of Pierce County’s agriculture sector and evaluating the effectiveness of the County’s zoning regulations for protecting agricultural lands. The County’s current ARL criteria will be revisited, with consideration given to alternatives. A series of technical memoranda are being prepared to illuminate different aspects of farmland protections.

This technical memorandum reviews factors that contribute to the success of farmers and ranchers in Pierce County. The analysis focuses attention on the reasons that growers have been successful in the past and whether those same elements can keep the agriculture sector on a growth path or if new factors may be needed to propel the industry.

Stakeholder Survey

To help inform the ARL evaluation the consultant team organized opportunities for public input, including:

- Interviews with a cross-section of farmers, rural landowners and other key stakeholders.
- A series of public meetings, and public testimony invited at Pierce County Council presentations.
- A survey open to farmers, landowners, taxing districts and other interested participants.

The survey was widely publicized to interested parties. The survey questions tested participants’



response and views on the consultant team’s preliminary recommendations published in July. Participants could respond online or via paper surveys distributed at three public meetings in August. In the end, a total of 208 stakeholders completed the survey. Highlights of the results are summarized below.

Highlights

- Most survey respondents are farmers and/or rural landowners (51%). Rural and urban residents are equally represented (33%).
- More than two-thirds (69%) support designating four agricultural production districts.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) concur with dropping Pierce County’s grass/legume productivity criterion.
- More than half of participants (59%) back changes to the prime soils criterion.
- Similarly, 68% want to retain two more current criteria without change:
 - Located outside UGA (statutory requirement)
 - Landowner may request ARL designation
- All of the other methods to protect prime farmland (beyond ARL designation) tested in the survey are supported by 60% to 83% of respondents. Most popular are property tax incentives (83%), farmers markets and other direct market channels (82%), low interest loans to purchase farmland/equipment (82%) and land trusts/conservation easements (79%).
- Receiving less support are the proposals to:
 - Reduce minimum parcel size in some districts (23% support/49% oppose).
 - Increase the minimum requirements for the size of abutting parcels (28% support/48% oppose).
- Many participants say they are still “not sure”. Responses for each question range from 18% to 28% “not sure”.

Participant Comments

Preserving Farmland/Open Space

- Open spaces need to be protected for future ag growers. Once you lose it, it’s very hard to get it back.
- I am nowhere an expert, but I’m tired of seeing open land disappear.
- Once viable farmland is gone, it is gone forever. Mount an education campaign so we all understand this and can oppose destruction of the land that gives us food.
- There is nothing wrong with open space. Not every piece of dirt in the county has to have a building on it.
- Protect the remaining farmland in Sumner.
- We need to do it NOW.
- The agricultural identity of Pierce County is an important part of our culture, community and history. Steps should be taken to protect and limit growth in our rural areas.



- I have not heard viable explanations about why farmland needs protection.
- It has disgusted me for years, they chose to make the Puyallup Valley, with all the beautiful valley soil that is great for agriculture, an industrial area covering all that productive soil.

Property Owner Rights

- Pierce County government should stay out of farmers' business and quit regulating farms, farmland and farmers out of existence.
- Let the individual decide what is best for him and his family. This is not your land so leave us alone.
- Protecting farmland is a misleading title that sounds better than the reality of the situation. What you are really doing is restricting the ownership rights of the land owner.
- Leave people alone, and go back to the city where you already have things screwed up.
- This is not the County's land. Let people decide what they want to do with their own property.

Commercial Viability of Farming

- Farms are a business. If government really wants to "save farmland" all they need to do is allow farmers to make a living. Saving the land will succeed in growing only weeds and ducks.
- "Commercial success" is misleading.
- It's not only commercial success, but small farms, too.
- This proposal assumes a commercially productive agriculture model. What about a person who grosses \$25,000 in annual revenue off 3 acres?
- Commercially viable sounds like agribusiness to me.
- "Commercially viable agriculture in these districts requires larger parcels" was true in the past – but no longer.

Planning/Zoning/Enforcement

- Strengthen the GMA
- Need to get city buy-in and stop the continued sprawl of cities for the sake of UGBs.
- Please stop allowing business parks, strip malls and other forms of paving over the best soils.
- Keep growth focused in centers and consider enacting policies that reflect a need to maintain a balance between undeveloped, rural and urban lands.
- Enforce current zoning. Do not allow ARL to become salvage yards. Why make more rules when the current are not being enforced?
- The County should be promoting compact communities as infrastructure is very, very expensive and sprawl continues to happen. Future taxpayers will not be able to keep up.
- Quit approving development outside of associated UGAs.
- Impose higher density requirements on future developments.



- Do not allow big chunks of land to be separated into smaller than 5-7 acre parcels. These big farm areas should not be subdivided.

ARL Criteria

- Minimum lot size should be increased to 40 acres or the houses allowed should be connected to worker/manager/owner/relative. Skagit County has this requirement.
- Start by preserving land that's actively farmed now. Saving open space that no one has touched in years is less likely to be actively farmed.
- Keep ARL grounded in actual production lands. Do not make the designation permanent. Allow opt out just as opt in is allowed.
- To the extent that farmland can be designated is contiguous areas, the better protection for farmers and farmland.
- Pierce County is a whole.
- Farming is NOT one size fits all.
- Why do we have to have criteria for what is grown? Just keep it all farmland.
- These areas are all in the same basic weather conditions and similar soil conditions. They should have LESS than 3.5 tons per acre yield requirements. They should NOT be only for 5 acres or more, it should be 1 acre or more. They should be located anywhere in the county, and the abutting parcels shouldn't have any bearing on the farmland.
- Key Peninsula has no prime farmland. It is glacial till, typically all soil or all clay with lots of rocks and gravel.
- Each area is unique and should be looked at individually and then as an integrated whole.
- Add Sumner to Puyallup/Orting district designation, please.
- An owner can be ARL if they want, regardless. I support an easier method for landowners to request designation.

Taxing Districts

- Cities need to stop depending on revenues from new housing development to prop up an unhealthy budget – right now, it's essentially a Ponzi scheme.
- For every \$1.00 collected in farm taxes, the County only pays \$.50 in services. No new roads, sewers, schools or parks need to be built to support the agriculture sector.
- Exempt schools or sites of future schools from any ARL designation regardless of whether they fall in or out of the UGA.
- Some very large or productive small agricultural enterprises should pay some property tax. They expect services rural property tax pay for.



Other Farmland Protections

- Addressing water rights for farmland and farm owners.
- An estimated 78% of the farmers in our County will want to sell their land in the next 10 years. The County should invest in the Purchase of Development Rights program in an effort to provide for the need to increase agricultural production in the next 10 years.
- Invest in more TDR/PDR transactions and do not negotiate away use of TDR for receiving sites through development agreements.
- Ag purchased through conservation futures should be either given or sold at a much reduced price to farmers who meet productivity goals for a period of 7 years.
- All of these strategies are important but none of them is a replacement for underlying zoning supporting agriculture and protecting soil through zoning.
- Expansion of ag exemptions for so called critical areas. Farmers are the original and best environmentalists.
- Flood control and drainage protections.
- It takes a broad spectrum of programs to keep farmland intact.

Public Education and Outreach

- Education in the schools as to where food comes from and what makes food healthy.
- More outreach and engagement with the farming community to better understand their priorities, needs and ideas for improving commercial viability for ag in the county.
- Public education, get into schools to educate and promote.
- Continue to engage the key stakeholders and the public throughout the entire process – not just when a decision is made.

