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Bainbridge Farmland Fertile With Red Tape

By Tristan Baurick
For the Kitsap Sun
Sunday, May 25, 2008

Winemaker Mike Lempriere installs a drip irrigation system along rows of grape starts at the city-owned Morales Farm on Lovgren Road. Despite having no long-term commitment from the city, Lempriere hopes to harvest his grapes when they reach maturity in four years. The owner of Perennial Vintners has struggled to expand his business but cannot afford more property on Bainbridge. (Photo by Tristan Baurick | For the Kitsap Sun)



Laughing Crow Farms intern Hilary Crowell, 24, clears weeds from rows of onions and garlic at a city-owned property on Day Road. Crowell traveled from Minneapolis to learn about farming on Bainbridge. With high land prices and few city-owned farmlands, Crowell said she likely won't put down her roots on the island. Instead, she may seek opportunities on land trust farms in Maine. (Photo by Tristan Baurick | For the Kitsap Sun)

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND

Mike Lempriere yanks a young blackberry bramble and slaps its roots against freshly tilled soil.

"That's what this all used to be," he says, waving a hand over a south-facing hillside now planted with rows of wine grapes. "Just blackberries and weeds. I spent weeks clearing it."

The weeds will fight to come back, but this land, he says, is seeded with a bigger problem.

"The city owns this property," says Lempriere, the owner of Perennial Vintners. "I'm playing it cool, but planting here is scary."

Lempriere has learned that the blessings of publicly owned farmland come with the curses of municipal bureaucracy. While the city has repeatedly affirmed the value of local farms in written resolutions, studies and innumerable meetings, little progress has been made in putting city farms to work for working farmers.

Once famed for its strawberry fields, the island has in recent decades transformed into a high-priced suburban enclave.

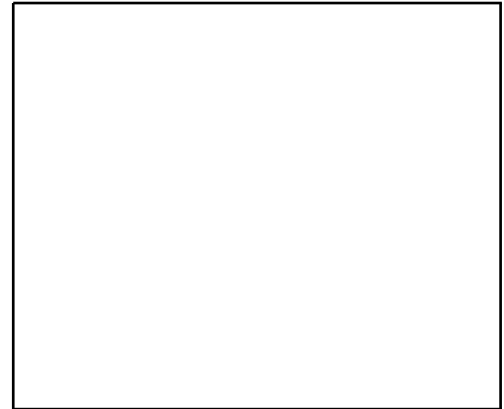
The island's growing population has expressed strong support for local agriculture, both in city priority surveys and in dollars spent at the flourishing Bainbridge Farmers Market. Meanwhile, the island's farmers have struggled to hold on to land valued more for its development potential than its productivity.

In response, the city has acquired 60 acres of farmland to ensure a portion of the island remains crowded with crops rather than condos.

But much of the city-owned farms have remained fallow, despite a corps of experienced farmers standing by with tools and seeds at the ready.

"I've waited for four years," said Lempriere, who also grows grapes on a half-acre of his own property. "I can't buy anymore land to expand. If I can't use this city land, I might as well put up a 'For Sale' sign and move off Bainbridge."

A handful of farmers have put less than half the city's farms into cultivation, but the growers' yearlong leases don't encourage roots to run deep. Many farmers feel



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overwhelmed when they approach the city for a better deal or to ask basic questions.

"We don't do well with bureaucracy," said Betsey Wittick, who grew four tons of vegetables on an acre of city land last year. "Farmers aren't that type. That's one of the reasons we get into farming."

A recent report by a city-commissioned farm advisory group recommended the city turn over the management of its farmlands to a nonprofit agency better able to recruit growers, negotiate long-term leases, coordinate resources and generally foster a more stable relationship with farmers.

The Trust for Working Landscapes has served these purposes for years, and is willing to do much more with its

proposed 99-year lease of city farms.

TWL was instrumental in obtaining the 14.5-acre Johnson Farm, the first of six farmlands the city purchased beginning in 2001. The group coordinated short-term leases with farmers on the city's 4.7-acre Morales Farm on Lovgren Road, organized volunteer maintenance projects and obtained federal funding for an irrigation project serving about 26 acres of city-owned farmland on Day Road.

Now its time for the city to stop stalling, and get out of the way, TWLs members say.

"The situation's embarrassing to us and hopefully to you," TWL member Ryan Vancil said to the Bainbridge City Council at a recent meeting. "The city needs to get out of the business of managing agricultural lands because you're just not doing it."

Vancil was frustrated when he learned the city might cut its share of funding for the Day Road irrigation project. TWL used a federal grant to buy the equipment and put volunteers to work installing the pipes. The project was stalled when the city dollars to spark the electrical system never came.

As a stopgap, two island farmers fronted \$30,000 of the promised city money to get the water moving through the pipes.

"Hopefully, the city lives up to their end of things because these farmers took money out of their savings for this," Vancil said.

Mayor Darlene Kordonowy, who commissioned the farming advisory group, acknowledges the city's slow progress in putting farmland into productive use.

Last week, she asked the council to pass a resolution indicating the city's support for agriculture, and requested that the council's Land Use Committee deliberate on the advisory group's recommendations next week.

TWL Director Yolanka Wulff has heard enough resolutions and recommendations.

"We have had these committees, the reports and TWL's eight years of on-the-ground experience," she said. "It's time to take the next step. This isn't brain surgery. It shouldn't be this hard."

Bill Pace chuckles a bit about the struggles of Bainbridge farmers. He has for eight years grown blueberries on 21 acres owned by the city of Bellevue.

"The city knows I know what I'm doing and they just let me do it," he said. It's simple."

But it's not so simple for a city with a high staff turnover rate and a proclivity on the part of elected officials to dabble in city hall's inner-workings, Wulff said.

That's not a problem in Bellevue, said Geoff Bradley, who has administered the city's 47 acres of farmland for 13 years.

"We manage them like parks (and) give the farmers a lot of flexibility," he said. "It's working great. We get lots of kids on our farms, picking blueberries on sunny July afternoons."

TWL has a similar vision for Bainbridge's city farms, including trails, educational programs, affordable farmer housing, and rows laden with grapes on the hillside Lempriere untangled from the weeds.

"Some farmers have a year-lease, and that's a good sign if you're a row cropper," said Lempriere, who favors transferring farm management to TWL. "But I'm putting vines in the ground. I'm investing in this, but I won't see (grapes) for four years."

As the recommended transfer of farm management winds its way through city hall, Wulff is hopeful Lempriere's vines will stay firmly in place.

"Right now we just have to take them out of the center of the political winds," she said.

Comments

Posted by BainbridgeClearCut on May 26, 2008 at 7:11 a.m. (Suggest removal)

Private land trusts or conservancies should be the route for the farmland. Taxpayers should not be asked to be in the position of country squire with holdings of land or a group of new urban farmers. Sell the land a market value ASAP. If more parks are needed -- and that is debatable at this time -- that is a purchase that will benefit the many and not just atmospheric.

COBI City Hall "red tape" problems -- hmmm. How do you think most people feel about interaction with COBI on building and land use. Red tape is the life blood of over-regulated jurisdictions like Bainbridge. Excess regulations add over \$250K to the cost of a BI house according to a recent UW economic study.

Mayor Kordonowy must be replaced due to severe failure of leadership demonstrated over the last 6 years. As the "captain" of our ship of state, she has failed. Go to YouTube Call to Recall. www.YouTube.com. Title is Deceit Deception Recall Bainbridge.

Posted by rgdimages on May 26, 2008 at 9:53 a.m. (Suggest removal)

Lacking from this story is the connection between the Trust for Working Landscapes and taxpayers. I get no indication of the flow of money ... would Bainbridge taxpayers continue to support these acres of tilled and treeless land, or would the Trust for Working Landscapes lease the land to farmers, and the city receive some source of revenue?
And are there any downside arguments to going to land trust form of management beside the obvious loss of perceived city control?

Posted by BainbridgeClearCut on May 26, 2008 at 10:18 a.m. (Suggest removal)

What would be the rate of return be of leased land? Should the taxpayers be reduced to expecting pennies on the dollar return? COBI government should have to do an analysis of the cost to have these nice-to-have atmospheric and then get out of the biz. COBI should aim to have their core missions perfected and leave share-cropping and farming to private individuals.

Posted by alliceaddertongue on May 26, 2008 at 7:31 p.m. (Suggest removal)

Cappy Olson for the Republicans - pave paradise and put up a parking lot. You read it here folks.

Posted by WeGotSuckered on May 26, 2008 at 11 p.m. (Suggest removal)

Interesting that Lempriere would complain about red tape , he knows nothing of it . He did not get a permit to clear that City land & I am sure he did not have to do an environmental review on the effects his farming will have on the stream that runs at the bottom of his Vineyard hillside , interesting indeed .I would like to see more background on this story . Taxpayers should be very aware of what their vote for Open Space created , which is a free boost for small commercial businesses like his .Wouldn't we all like a break like that ?

Posted by capsea on May 27, 2008 at 8:12 a.m. (Suggest removal)

yes, we should sell all park and farm land to greedy developers.

why would we want to live in a community that produces its own fruit and vegetables? I much prefer the variety that is trucked in from 100's of miles.

screw the tourists and the money they bring to the community.

Posted by BainbridgeClearCut on May 27, 2008 at 9:09 a.m. (Suggest removal)

capsea -- I agree with your proposition on selling farm land. Do not agree on selling all parks -- perhaps some though.

Why can't people have their own "Victory" gardens on their own land. If we have 21,000 registered vehicles, you can imagine how many ample produce just from private properties. Also, why not keep animals for part of the food chain. The answer is not for COBI to use taxpayer money for atmospheric of urban farmers using public lands.

Posted by montym on May 27, 2008 at 9:10 a.m. (Suggest removal)

We at the Pierce Conservation District lease government land to farmers, both for profit and nonprofit organizations. It's no big deal to work with them, you just need to understand their needs and goals and be willing to work with them.

We've worked with somewhat less success to get Pierce County Water Programs to lease floodplains along the Puyallup River. We've gotten some freed up, but it seems the bigger the agency the less flexible they're willing to be.

In any case, from both responsible land management and environmental standpoints, well managed working land > land left fallow.

Come see Joel Salatin next Wednesday, June 4th at Olympic College. His book "Everything I want to do is Illegal" covers this topic very well...

Learn more about the event at

<http://montysview.blogspot.com/2008/0...>

Monty Mahan

Posted by ML on June 4, 2008 at 1:07 p.m. (Suggest removal)

In answer to "WeGot...", Mr. Lempriere is working with Trust For Working Landscapes who is in turn working with the Kitsap Conservation District to maintain the property in an appropriate fashion. The vineyard block was laid out in compliance with seasonal stream setbacks, and a filter strip of grass and native vegetation will be planted this year as per schedule in the Morales Farm Plan.

Perhaps you would you like to help Mr. Lempriere take care of the ~1 cubic yard of Japanese Knotweed roots that he hand cleared from that hillside? (They'll re-root if not managed carefully.)

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