

A FARMERS TESTIMONIAL: by Steve Huck

We currently operate a beef cattle farm and some of our land is in the proposed area to be incorporated. To be clear, new city taxes on farmland is not the biggest concern for farmers. I am not saying it isn't a concern at all, but there are definitely bigger concerns. Legitimate farmland typically gets a tax break on property taxes and I would think it would also be reduced in the city. Even still, with the cyclical nature of farming, some years are difficult to turn a profit and any additional fees/taxes, even if they are "relatively" small could make a tough year even tougher.

Before I get into specifics for the farms, I want to caution you about accepting the message from TOIL that they want to protect the farms and stop the growth. Stopping growth is not their objective. In fact, their plan calls for continued growth at a fairly high pace. A municipality is kind of like a business and all businesses need to promote growth. Keep in mind that the city will receive relatively little in taxes from the large farms due to the tax breaks farms get. If they wanted to keep the farms going it would not make sense to include them in the proposed boundaries. After all, the farms will bring relatively little in the way of taxes while they will still have to be served at the expense of the citizens within the town. At the first meeting I went to about 2 years ago to listen to what TOIL was proposing, I stuck around after the meeting and spoke with one of the members questioning the inclusion of 40 square miles of farm land that was practically 100% opposed to being included. His response to me was **"Steve, we need your land for future growth."** He went on to say that he looked forward to the day that the land we farmed was developed. You will not hear them say that today because they are in sales pitch mode.

One of the big concerns that farmers have is that we would lose protections afforded to us from the state that allow farms to operate as needed. Protections that legally go away the minute the operation finds itself within a municipality. Can a city try to emulate the same protections? They can try but they can never guarantee it. Even the proposal being advertised will ultimately mean nothing as the first council will make these decisions and they are not bound to the plan TOIL is touting. There are numerous examples of protections I am talking about but examples would be hours of operation, the ability to use "organic" fertilizers, strict noise ordinances, etc. The biggest concern is the protection from frivolous lawsuits that could occur.

Ride through any city around and you will notice that active farming operations are a very rare thing. This is not by coincidence. Farms and city regulations do not play well together. My family has been farming in the Lancaster and York County area for over 100 years, and we hope to continue it for many more. Back in the 1980's we were running cattle in 5 counties on a total of 26 separate farms (mostly rented land at that time). We have friends that have been pushed out of Charlotte, Pineville, Fort Mill, Matthews, Weddington, Mineral Springs and many others. In the vast majority of cases it was not because they wanted to sell and move, it was because it was no longer feasible to try and operate a farm profitably under current restrictions and pressures of the municipality that had pulled them in. We have had friends sued because they used poultry litter for fertilizer, another was forced to get rid of their hand full of chickens they had at their barn because the rooster crowed early in the morning interrupting the neighbors sleep. We have had friends who were no longer able to operate after a certain time at night, and had to wait until a certain time in the morning to start (farmers do not punch time clocks). Much of our operations, especially during harvest and planting time, are weather dependent and when the conditions are right you may have to work 24/7 to get the job done. In a county, you can do that. In a city, all bets are off. These are only a couple of scenarios of which there are many.

Am I naïve enough to think that no farms will sell in the county and they will all sell in the city? Of course not. There will be a few that will sell when the price of land gets high enough regardless of where they are. But for the vast majority of the farms in the Osceola, Van Wyck and North Corner area of the incorporation effort, I can assure you that the owners have no interest in selling out. I talk to them often. Unlike much of the land that has been developed in the northern part of IL, the farms in the southern part are typically much larger parcels and have been in families for generations, and most importantly, the families still live on the land. There is a lot of concern from the farms and rightly so. We currently have the infrastructure of the farms as we need them and it is no fun to have to relocate and build that back from scratch. But in our conversations, we are all talking about the potential impact from incorporation. Even though none want to sell now, there will be quite a bit of reconsidering if the incorporation effort succeeds as proposed. We have been receiving calls and letters for several years from speculators/developers wanting to buy out the large parcels. We have said no. But when the ability to operate as we need to is compromised, I look for a few dominoes to start falling. And when a few fall, who knows when it will stop.