

## County committees ponder future concerns: Planning licensing

Shortly after the Vernon County Board of Supervisors voted down a moratorium on large-scale farm operations, Aug. 7, two county committees met to discuss future possibilities. The board had approved moving forward with comprehensive planning and a livestock facility licensing ordinance. The county's land and water conservation committee, which recommended the licensing ordinance to the county board, met on Thursday, Aug. 9. Supervisor Judy Wilmes was confused about why the board was being attacked for not having done something sooner to prevent conflicts like the one that just came up. "I feel that the problem we went through on Tuesday (livestock facility licensing and moratorium ordinances) really is a product of something that happened several years ago, Wilmes said. "I was wondering if we could get a good fix on what the drop dead dates were on certain things. "I am remembering May (2006) was the last time a municipality could plan an ordinance that was stricter than the model ordinance. Was there some earlier dates that we missed, too? Wilmes continued. Was this ever on the agenda when we had a chance to work on it? Everyone was up there being demonized practically if they voted against it (the livestock ordinances)." Wilmes questioned the land and water conservation office and questioned the inner workings of the office in the past and why people, who had once worked in that office and spoke in favor of the moratorium, had not pushed for zoning or land use ordinances while they had worked for the county. Wilmes also asked why more wasn't done with the issue when the Valley Stewardship Network shared office space with the land and water department. "That was free office space for an outfit that has one point of view," Wilmes said.

I am thinking about how this office worked at that time. What was done and what was avoided? What was let slip by because it was hard? I don't know what, but I know that when I was on here (land and water committee) and wanted to be on here because of land use planning, I don't remember anything coming up like, 'Let's work on livestock siting,' because we only have 'X' amount of months left." "It just so happened that I talked with Jeff (Hastings) about this briefly," County Conservationist Kelly Jacobs said. "What he told me was at the time when that decision could have been made and the discussion was happening and we needed to get in before the May 2006 day, he went to county board chair at the time, which was Lee Nerison, and Lee Nerison did not want anything to do with livestock siting at the time. In which case Jeff never pursued it." (Editor's note: The Broadcaster has unsuccessfully tried to contact Hastings several times in the days leading up to our deadline.) "Is this something like the Nuremberg trials defense?" asked Wilmes. "I am just passing along what I know," Jacobs said. In a phone interview, Nerison said when issues like zoning and comprehensive planning have come up in the past the county board has not supported county involvement. "When I was on the board the board itself didn't want it," Nerison said. "Zoning has always been a four-letter word in the county for years. With comprehensive planning I know that state takes the plans from the towns and cities, so we felt we could always pass an ordinance adopting their plans. We felt no one knows better how to plan than the towns themselves." In a phone interview, Kathy Fairchild, who was working with the Valley Stewardship Network during the time they were located in the same office space as the land and water conservation department, said VSN was instrumental in getting townships started on comprehensive planning. Fairchild said VSN put together comprehensive planning toolkits in 2001 for townships to help them with the planning process. "The basic consensus was that the county was not going to touch comprehensive planning, they were going to leave it to the towns," Fairchild said. Committee member Will Beitlich asked how the 1,000 fee got set in the new livestock facility licensing ordinance. "That's expensive," Beitlich said. Jacobs said other counties have said they spend an average of about 17 hours to process an application. Jacobs said she and Project Manager Paul Krahn will review applications and then forward them to the land and water conservation committee for review. Jacobs said she will be working with Krahn, who also handles the manure storage permit process, to coordinate both applications as well as nutrient management plans. Jacobs said the land and water conservation department will have to coordinate all the ordinances that apply to livestock operations and make a flow chart that outlines the steps of the process. "I am really happy with how the board vote turned out," Jacobs said. "It is a big step forward for the county." The county health committee met on Tuesday and discussed what the moratorium's failure means for their committee. The health committee had proposed the moratorium on large animal confinement operations because of information they had received from Dr. David Chakoian and residents that there was a potential health risk to those who live around such operations. The committee had received a letter from the state department of agriculture and the Wisconsin Counties Association that they were on questionable legal grounds to challenge farming operations. Some on the committee questioned how to address health concerns at the state level without the help of the state. "Counties should get together and challenge the right to farm bill for clarification, and that is not an easy task," said committee member Gail Frie. "Especially when you get a counties association showing up in shiny suits and telling everyone to vote against it," said committee member Lynn Chakoian. "It is just a complete breakdown of the government's ability to protect the health of the people," Frie said. "We lost out power on non-metallic mining as well, because we didn't have zoning," Chakoian said. Committee member Richard Hansen questioned the comprehensive planning process and its ability to help with land use issues.

Hansen said. "A good land use plan points directly to zoning," Frie said. Committee member Leo Verbsky said his township controls land use through ordinances. "That's one way of doing it," Frie said. "But it is not an acceptable way of doing it," said Chakoian. "But at least we have something," Verbsky said. "This hog operation was in contact with our township and when they found out we were in comprehensive planning they left." The committee came to a consensus that they will continue to investigate the health and environmental concerns with large confinement operations and determine if more regulation needs to be added to the licensing ordinance while working at the state level to work for changes that allow more local control. County Board Chairman Thomas Spenner announced his appointments to the comprehensive planning commission. They are James

Servais, County Supervisor District 5; Raymond Johnson, Town of Christiana Comprehensive Committee Chairman; Cliff Peterson, Town of Whitestown Chairman; Leo Verbsky, County Supervisor District 29 and Town of Greenwood Supervisor; Brad Steinmetz, Town of Stark Chairman; Lynn Chakoian, County Supervisor District 16; Ralph Hicks, County Supervisor District 14. The commission is scheduled to meet for the first time on Aug. 22 at 1 p.m. in the county board room at the Vernon County Courthouse.

### About the Author

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