

Skagit Journal; Farmers See Park Plans As Plague in the Making

By TIMOTHY EGAN, Special to The New York Times
Published: December 04, 1999

BURLINGTON, Wash., Nov. 29 — The farmers of the Skagit Valley have struggled through a decade of bad weather, debt and unpredictable markets. Now, just as good times are returning to this rich alluvial valley 65 miles north of Seattle, they see a new threat in a proposal to build a farm theme park amid real farms.

Paving the land over for a fake farm for tourists will change the character of this valley and open it to other commercial encroachments, the farmers say.

"The ironic thing about this proposal is that they want it to be like an agricultural museum, but what it could do is put all the real farmers on the shelf," said Don Kruse, who grows strawberries, peas, cucumbers and wheat here.

The developer, the Trillium Corporation of Bellingham, Wash., says the proposed 280-acre Hollyhock Farms will help by promoting local products along with retail shops, a bed-and-breakfast inn, a gourmet restaurant, a recreational vehicle park and gardens - all on the site of some of the most productive farms in the Northwest. Hundreds of farmers signed petitions opposing any zoning change.

David Syre, president of Trillium, told farmers only 40 acres would be rezoned for commercial use and the rest would be a working farm for tourists to observe.

Tourists who pass through the Skagit Valley on their way to the San Juan Islands to the west or the North Cascades National Park to the east are already hindering farmers by clogging the rural roads with traffic, critics of the proposal say.

Strawberries, raspberries, peas, lettuce, carrots, wheat, apples and tulip bulbs are among the products of the 100,000 acres of farmland on either side of the Skagit River, which twists through the North Cascades on its way to Puget Sound. The valley produces nearly 75 percent of the nation's cabbage seed and half its beet seeds.

In the last five years 13 percent of the farmland here has been lost, mostly to development of new housing and businesses. Nationwide, 3 million acres of farmland are converted to other use every year, Federal Government figures say.

"What we're doing is eliminating our best farmland because so much of it is close to the cities, and that puts pressure on the marginal land that is more subject to soil erosion and other problems," said Will Shafroth, western director of American Farmland Trust, a preservation group.

He said the farms are suffering a domino effect. "The process begins with speculation, when somebody wants to change the zoning, and that makes it harder on the people who want to farm the land," he said.

The farmers here have told Mr. Syre that if he wants to celebrate Northwest farming, as his brochure proclaims, he should begin by not paving a working farm. "Whether a development has a farm theme is irrelevant," said Lisa Nielsen, who helped organize a preservation group. "If that development occurs on prime farmland, that land is gone."

Members of Skagit Valley granges asked a county planning commission to fight any change. "A very small percentage of the earth's surface is suitable for the production of feed and fiber," they said.

The theme park proposal has yet to be formally submitted to the Skagit County commissioners, but some have indicated they will probably oppose any change in zoning through the next year.

Most of the Skagit Valley is zoned for a minimum of one house per 40 acres, but in the last few years, nonfarmers have bought 40-acre parcels, taken the land out of production and built large homes on hills.

"I don't think anybody ever envisioned that somebody would buy 40 acres just to put a home on it," said Keven Entrikin, who works for a vegetable processing company here.

Mr. Syre recently pledged to consider another site closer to Burlington for the his farm theme park. But with two shopping malls already rising on that site, farmers say the whole valley could use a break from development.

"It took the Skagit River nearly 20,000 years to create this valley," said Dave Hedlin, whose family has farmed the valley for three generations. "Let's not pave it over in a few years' time."