

Local farmer calls for Clark County to rally for preservation



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Robert Zumstein's father came to America with the simple dream of owning a farm. A century later, his son worries that dream could die in Clark County unless people take deliberate steps to keep it alive.

Born in 1896 near Kerns, Switzerland, the elder Zumstein had little hope of fulfilling the dream in his home country. Farms in those days rarely changed hands through business deals. Instead, they were passed on from generation to generation. As a young man, he knew the farm would go to his older brother, so at age 19 he set out for America, the land of opportunity.

The next phase of the adventure spanned an ocean, a continent and twenty years before he finally realized the dream and purchased what is now the Zumstein Family Farm in 1941. Robert was 2 years old at the time.

In those days, the farm consisted of 80 acres, but only about 10 had been cleared for farming. As young as age 6, Zumstein recalls splitting wood, cleaning the barn, feeding animals, shoveling snow, and picking up roots to help his father clear more land. The farmhouse had no interior walls or insulation to keep out the cold wind and snow. Rows of rough-cut 1x12 boards made up the flooring.

Now, the family has cleared 50 acres and keeps 35 acres of forest. They own small herd of 14 cattle and a few horses. Hay production reaches about 2000 bales per year. And they harvest about 15,000 board-feet of timber annually. In 2008, Clark County Farm Forestry named Zumstein Tree Farmer of the Year.

But over the years, Zumstein has felt a growing unease with the development he feels threatens the fabric of Clark County's rural community.

"When I look at Clark County's all-consuming sprawl in the last 55 years, it scares me," he said.

"This growth is in no way sustainable."



The Zumstein Family Farm

LOCAL FARMER ROBERT

ZUMSTEIN'S FAMILY has lived on the same land in Clark County since the 1940s. Rapid development on Clark County's rural lands inspired Zumstein to call for the creation of a preservation society to protect agricultural and natural lands.

The worry is nothing new to the area. Pro-growth and anti-growth factions have waged an acrimonious decades-long battle over the county's comprehensive growth management plan. The Alternative 4 proposal, now removed from the county's official preferred alternative for this year's update, exposed a deep rift among local residents, activists and landowners. As the dust begins to settle, special interest groups like Clark County Citizens United, which lobbied heavily for Alternative 4, are already preparing legal arguments for a court battle. At Clark County Council meetings, citizens now regularly yell at councilors and speakers from their seats in the audience. Insults and political threats fly in open comment sessions. And at least one councilor, David Madore, Alternative 4's principal author, faces accusations of racism and harassment from county staff and a union representing them.

The crux of the issue lies in a fundamental disagreement between the two factions over who should have final say in land use decisions: society at large or landowners themselves. Landowners and the groups representing them argue that ownership should take precedent and that planning regulations violate the property rights of people who invested in the land. Activists and planners worry that landowners will cave to pressure from big money interests to divide up large tracts of land for development - which would be near impossible to put back together once they're sold off to different owners.

"Farmland is a national treasure and should be protected with the same loving care given to wetlands, water, air, and wilderness," Zumstein said. "It should be there for every generation that follow us. It's not ours to destroy."

Skyrocketing housing costs have softened the opinions of some preservation-minded people, but Zumstein looks to Europe for a model which has provided for growth without overtaking farms and natural lands. While traveling the European continent, he noted a pattern of robust cities connected by a thriving rail service all with minimal sprawl and a deep respect for all lands.

“How did they manage to accomplish this when Europe is thousands of years old?” he asked. “We have been here in the Northwest for about 150 years and look at how much we have consumed.”

He concedes the problem extends beyond Clark County. He pointed to Orange County, CA as an example of what could happen without a structure to guide development in Clark County's rural lands.

“This is not just a problem here,” Zumstein said. “It's a national problem. And it's not just farmland, but all lands.”

But rather than working to implement governmental controls to preserve the land, Zumstein thinks he can partner with fellow local landowners to voluntarily protect the land over generations. His idea involves gathering other community-minded individuals to form a society to aid and encourage landowners to preserve farms and forests under one owner.

“What I'm thinking is, we need to put something together as an organization because I think it has to be done that way,” he said. “Alone, we won't stand. We're going to fall to big money. The next generation will sell it.”

In addition to farming, Zumstein provides access to his land for special group use, weddings, and even large-scale reenactor gatherings. Among the trees, creeks and hills, Zumstein also keeps a large collection of antique logging equipment for display and owns a traveling museum of artifacts from Clark County's past for display at small town events. The idea, he said, is that farmland can be useful and even profitable without actually farming, if the owner chooses not to farm.

For now, he plans to recruit as many people as he can to plot out the exact mechanism for the organization. After starting with a core group of dedicated landowners, he hopes to grow outward and help more and more people preserve their natural and agricultural land.

“I want to scold the people,” he said. “We're not thinking far enough into the future. There is no logic

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in a society that trashes its farmland while growing its population at a ballooning rate, And with climate change, we don't know what the future holds.