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Farmland can be saved

Program keeps cities from annexing acreage

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More than 7,000 acres in Oldham County have been placed in a state agricultural program over the past two years to signal that the land is best suited for farming and to keep it from being annexed by cities.

The move nearly triples the amount of land in the state's program and comes as developments continue to pop up across the growing county.

"It was another way of protecting the land ... because a lot of cities are annexing rural land to increase (their) tax base," said Austin Musselman, who with his wife, Layla, organized the effort in the U.S. 42 area.

"Once they do that (annexation), it makes it easier for different types of development to occur on the land," he added.



By Andrea Uhde, The Courier-Journal

Layla and Austin Musselman want their land to become part of the agricultural district. Once cities annex land, it's easier for development to take place.

Land classified in an agricultural district cannot be annexed by adjacent cities that could levy taxes on it, making any products produced on the farm cost more, said Kurt Mason of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's natural resources conservation service.

Also, if the state proposes a project such as a new highway or prison on the land, it must hold several hearings to justify the location, Mason said.

The state law allowing landowners to petition their local conservation district to form an agricultural district was adopted in 1982. The local district reviews the petition and makes a recommendation to the Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission, which has the final say.

The program helps reduce the amount of prime farmland converted to non-farm use, according to the Division of Conservation's Web site. Being in the program does not keep land from being developed in the future, just from being annexed, Mason said.

Last year, landowners in Brownsboro petitioned the Kentucky Soil and Water Conservation Commission to put 3,236 acres of land in the program. And in May this year, residents near U.S. 42 and the Goshen/La Grange area petitioned to have 4,018 acres added.

Oldham now ranks ninth in the state for its agricultural district land, with more than 50 farms and 11,700 acres in the program.

The Musselmans, who own a 400-acre cattle farm, invited 15 to 20 neighbors to a dinner at their home last fall to discuss the program, and eventually many of them signed on.

"It's another layer of protection against certain types of development that could occur," Austin Musselman said. His mother, who owns Ashbourne Farms outside of La Grange, already had her property in the district.

He said the decision was partly prompted by the fact that Oldham planners want to develop master plans for the county that will be done based on eight areas. One plan is underway in Brownsboro near Ky. 329.

"A lot of times it's prompted by something, people get nervous about something," Mason said. "Really what the (agricultural) district does is to make a kind of a public statement that those lands, those people that own the land, are interested in continuing an agricultural way of life."

He said the highest form of protection is for property to be dedicated as a nature preserve, or to have a conservation easement. But an agricultural district is less restrictive.

In Brownsboro, landowners started pushing to be part of the agricultural district program when the master planning process began, said county planner Emily Liu.

"I think education is probably key," she said of the sudden interest in the last two years. "A lot of people didn't even know the program existed."

Enrolling in the program is free and property owners can re-enroll every five years.

"I feel very glad that there's another symbol that this land is best suited for agriculture and that's its highest and best use," Musselman said.

"I feel very glad that our neighbors could come together and share in this designation."

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Information

To learn more about the state's agricultural program, visit www.conservation.ky.gov or contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District.
