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Federal “seed money” Will Help Snohomish County Save Stilly Valley Farms

Snohomish County's Pilot Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Program received a big boost when the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provided notice that the county is eligible to receive up to \$552,500 in grant funds to preserve local farmland.

“We're delighted that NRCS is helping us save farms that are at risk of being developed,” said the TDR program's creator, County Councilman John Koster. ” With these funds, the county hopes to protect the farms by negotiating with the landowners for the county to purchase a conservation easement this year,” Koster said.

NRCS notified Snohomish County officials that the agency is awarding Snohomish County as much as \$552,500 in a Farmland Protection Program grant. The grant will match the county's own monies dollar-for-dollar to purchase conservation easements on farmlands in the central Stillaguamish Valley between I-5 and Arlington. Snohomish County's local match is from Conservation Futures funds, which the County Council earmarked by motion for the TDR program.

The grant award gives Snohomish County as much as 36% of NRCS's total Farmland Protection Program dollars for Washington, the largest single award in the state. The actual NRCS award amount will depend on the value of a final land appraisal of the farmland, now nearing completion.

Under Snohomish County's Pilot TDR Program development rights will be purchased from willing owners of Stillaguamish River Valley farms. Those properties then remain permanently protected from development while the farmer continues to own and operate the underlying farm. The development rights removed from the farm will then be sold to property owners in other less environmentally sensitive areas.

Snohomish County is pairing the federal NRCS grant with county dollars to immediately preserve several key farms that are in the most imminent threat of being subdivided and developed into 10-acre residential estates. But preserving the other farms in the 3,452 acre central Stillaguamish valley from conversion to residential estates through TDRs will depend on the county establishing a free, private-market between development right sellers (farmers) and development right buyers (property owners and developers in areas that can be developed more profitably if they buy a development right).

Koster added that while the county is utilizing “seed money” to make some initial conservation easement purchases to protect farms, to save the rest of the central Stillaguamish Valley the TDR program “must be one in which free market forces are allowed to operate.” He continued, “With that understood, I’m ecstatic about the grant award.”

Koster then praised other county officials for their “diligence and teamwork” on the project. “We would not have been able to get the TDR project this far were it not for the commitment of County Executive Bob Drewel and the expertise of individual members of the PDS and Public Works Departments.

Snohomish County officials are working with the NRCS to bring forward a formal grant agreement for Council review. The grant agreement must be finalized and signed before September 30.

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