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Canyon County mulls 'Enterprise Zone' for rural areas

Sharon Strauss

CANYON COUNTY — A coalition formed to examine the future value of agricultural lands has some strong feelings on how to balance land development with protection of Idaho's rural areas.

Those who make up The Coalition for Agriculture's Future include about 30 groups that represent agri-business, private sector and association groups and other businesses, all whom share a concern about the future of everything that falls under the umbrella of agriculture, from farming and food processing to wine producers to meat-packing companies.

The coalition's chairman, George Crookham, said the coalition represents the average citizen and is concerned about uncontrolled growth in the county, infrastructure issues and the future of valuable farmland.

At the same time, Canyon County commissioners are pondering the creation of what they call an Enterprise Zone to economically stimulate the rural areas of the county and revitalize small towns. Still unsure what an Enterprise Zone would look like in terms of job growth and development, county officials stressed the idea is in the exploratory stage.

"We are in the process of hearing from several different cities, highway districts, ag groups, etc., as to what do we all want this to look like," County Commissioner David Ferdinand told the Idaho Press-Tribune. "The process is in a very preliminary, input-gathering stage, so as more information is gathered, we will have a clearer picture of how county residents will define the zone."

But the Coalition for Agriculture's Future — a proponent for new job creation and not anti-development — took a stand with advertisements in the Idaho Press-Tribune that expressed alarm that such a zone may pose a risk to the preservation of prime county farmland.

Commissioners said the coalition's ads appeared prematurely, yet they hope they serve to spark a productive dialogue with all interested parties in the future.

One coalition advertisement depicts a striped area in red ranging from Parma to Notus and Greenleaf to Wilder, showing the land areas being proposed as the new Enterprise Zone. Commercial and industrial development would be encouraged in the zone, the coalition said.

But Canyon County commissioners and Dan Hunter, the interim director of the Development Services Department, said the ad has confused some residents because no map has been approved by the Board of Commissioners yet, and the map that was used in the ad was a concept to show areas that may be included in the Enterprise Zone and not intended as a proposed area of the zone.

Overall, the coalition's members hope to work with commissioners to make sure the agricultural economy is not sacrificed in the name of commercial and industrial development, the coalition's chairman said.

"We are for enterprise zones but not at the scale that they're representing," Crookham said. "It's so big, it doesn't stay within the development areas of the communities, which any wise developer will tell you that is the proper way to plan for the future or develop a community."