

TO: Mayor Rhodes-Conway and the Madison Common Council
FROM: Madison Food Policy Council & Dane County Food Council
RE: Preserving Agricultural Land Use on Raemisch Farm Property
DATE: February 15, 2022

Legistar #[68696](#) & [69274](#)

The Joint Madison Food Policy Council (MFPC)/Dane County Food Council (DCFC) authorized the Regional Agriculture & Food Sovereignty Work Group (RAFS) to develop this memo about the issue of farmland preservation in relation to the proposed [rezoning](#) and [preliminary plat](#) of the 63.5 acre parcel between Packers Ave. and N. Sherman Ave. known as the Raemisch Farm. At its meeting on Wednesday, February 16, 2022 the Joint Council approved this memo and forwarded it to the Mayor and the Common Council. The importance of farmland preservation has been raised numerous times by the MFPC, especially during the Comprehensive Plan Work Group's efforts during the city-wide Imagine Madison process in 2018, but it still has not been formally addressed at a policy level.

In 2020 a group of residents established the Raemisch Farm Work Group (RFWG) to study and organize around potential uses for this land, working with land conservancies, land trusts and urban agriculture practitioners. There is now strong community support for preserving this parcel of land as open space for conservation, agricultural and recreational uses. RAFS recommends that the Common Council **Place on File without Prejudice** the current proposal and maintain the parcel's agricultural zoning status. We hope that any future developer would bring back a rezoning and plat proposal that better balances the strong community values that support local food and the preservation of farmland as expressed in adopted plans with development interests.

BACKGROUND

Throughout its history, the MFPC has worked on policies for the City of Madison to promote the preservation and conservation of farmland and open space. In 2017 and 2018, one of its Work Groups contributed to the most recently adopted [Comprehensive Plan](#) which states

"Dane County contains some of Wisconsin's most productive farmland. Feedback through the Imagine Madison process highlighted the importance of infill/redevelopment and compact edge growth to reduce the loss of farmland."

This year the RAFS Work Group submitted a [policy memo](#) to guide the leasing of city-owned agricultural land. For your reference and guidance on the Raemisch Farm issue, please consider the following Strategies adopted in the Comprehensive Plan:

- **Land Use:** Strategy 6 - Facilitate compact growth to reduce the development of farmland. ([part 1, p. 43](#))
- **Neighborhoods:** Strategy 8 - Ensure access to food that is affordable, nutritious and culturally specific. Identify public and private spaces suitable for community gardens and explore expansion of existing gardens to meet demand. ([part 2, p. 14](#))

- Economy & Opportunity: Strategy 7 - Support efforts for businesses and consumers to produce and buy local food, products and services. Foster a [Northside Food Innovation District. \(part 2, p. 27\)](#)
- Culture & Character: Strategy 3 - Create safe and affirming community spaces that bring people together and provide social outlets for underrepresented groups. Identify existing underutilized spaces, both public and private, and help increase their usage and activation. [\(part 2, p. 36\)](#)
- Green & Resilient: Strategy 9 - Support sustainable farming and gardening practices that protect the ecosystem and public health. Identify opportunities for local food production within the city. [\(part 2, p. 54\)](#)
- Effective Government: Strategy 1 - Pursue regional solutions to regional issues. Work with Dane County and other municipalities to develop a regional food systems plan. [\(part 2, p. 57\)](#)

VALUE OF FARMLAND PRESERVATION

“Loss of farmland is essentially permanent. It takes natural forces millenia to build richly productive soil; bulldozers can destroy fertile farmland in minutes.” - [Why Preserve Farmland?](#)

From 2001-2016, 249,800 acres of Wisconsin’s agriculture land were developed or compromised – over 16,000 acres annually. According to the American Farmland Trust, *“The loss of land impacts our access to food and the health of our local rural economies. Agriculture depends on the presence of a sufficient land base and the loss of that land threatens people’s livelihoods and the state agricultural heritage.”* As Wisconsin farms continue to consolidate, the number of farmers themselves continue to decrease in this \$104.8 billion ag-based economy. Maintaining Agricultural Zoning on the Raemisich Farm’s 63.5 acres would yield many benefits ***for our community as a whole***:

Food security and resilience

- Reduced demand for imports when food is grown within the city, which in turn reduces vulnerability to supply chain failures
- More opportunities for people to produce and consume nutritious, culturally relevant foods
- Reduced transportation costs and fossil fuel emissions

Ecosystem services

- Preservation of old growth trees that contribute to carbon sequestration and the reduction of urban heat islands
- Flood prevention by preserving an ephemeral wetland, promoting water absorption and soil retention on sloping land
- Maintaining an already designated wildlife corridor
- Maintaining existing bird and pollinator habitat

Economic benefits

- Subsistence gardening/farming strengthens resilience by offsetting families' need to purchase food
- Entrepreneurial opportunities for market growers
- Integration of productive agricultural land into the regional food system and value-added businesses that support jobs in the area

COMMUNITY DEMAND FOR GROWING SPACE

The Gardens Network, a partnership between Rooted, UW-Madison Extension Dane County and the City of Madison, has been conducting a land access survey since 2019 (see attached). Eighty (80) growers, primarily Madison residents, have requested access to over 120 acres of land. Several of these growers sell at farmers markets, and many of them are subsistence growers from the Hmong community. Only a mile and a half from Raemisch Farm, Troy Community Gardens, a 7.5 acre space with 348 20'x20' plots, has had a waiting list for 3 years. To assure access to as many community members as possible, rental is limited to 4 plots per household. Gardeners who need more space to feed themselves and their families often rent multiple plots at different gardens around town. Small- to mid-scale market and subsistence farmers in Madison often haul equipment and tools many miles to surrounding cities and towns to find sufficient growing space.

COMMUNITY VISION

The City of Madison has a history of and an interest in thriving urban agriculture. [Groundswell Conservancy](#) is currently seeking additional space to expand their agricultural conservation projects (see attached). At Pasley's Swan Creek Farm, Groundswell provides land access and tenure for Robert Pierce and his [Neighborhood Food Solutions](#) organization. At [Westport Community Farm](#), 10 acres are used by 7 HMoob (Hmong) families for subsistence and market farming and 14 HMoob (Hmong) elders tend the Lifting Hearts Therapeutic Garden. Groundswell's purpose is to protect special places, forever. They say on their website: "Farm soil is a limited resource—once it's converted to another use, it's gone forever."

Over a decade ago property-owner Bruce Raemisch gave Susan Hobart, a teacher at Lake View Elementary, permission to walk students onto the land to observe the wetlands and migrating wildlife.

"It gave a rare opportunity for the students contiguous to school to observe a unique and different ecosystem. Often a student would find a corn husk buried in the snow, next to the footprints of a vole or field mouse, leading to discussions about animal foraging and habitats." - Susan Hobart, MSED, NBCT
Lake View Elementary

Lake View Elementary School is home to the only Hmong immersion language school in the state of Wisconsin -- one of only three in the United States. In the 2020-2021 school year, 80.7% of Lake View students were from "economically disadvantaged" families, and

76.7 % were students of color [according to the WI Department of Public Instruction](#). Many of the Lake View families garden at Troy Community Gardens. The small plots at Troy provide a living harvest for the Hmong and southeast Asian families in the area but, without a car, it's a long walk to haul the harvest home.

In 2017 Groundswell purchased a wooded section of the Raemisch Farm property adjacent to the Lake View Elementary school to serve as a [school forest](#). While the Green Street proposal aims to preserve that space, parents and teachers at Lake View have hoped to expand that area to preserve their walks into the wetlands and provide garden space for the families of their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Place on File without Prejudice the current proposal so the land retains its Agriculture Zoning for the following reasons:
 1. Farmland Preservation is a stated goal of adopted City plans and is referenced several times in the most recent Comprehensive Plan
 2. There is a demonstrated community demand for agricultural production land
 3. These acres are located near planned and existing food businesses and would be a vital addition to the Northside Food Innovation District
 4. Noise from F35s makes area unsuitable for residential construction

2. Any future proposal for rezoning and replatting should address the following issues:
 1. Proximity to renters who need garden space
 2. Proximity to existing and planned food businesses
 3. Demand for market gardens
 4. If Housing is proposed, consider
 1. Agrihood (Comprehensive Plan [part 2, p. 54](#), defined in [Appendices, p. 64](#))
 2. Concept B of Northport-Warner Park-Sherman Neighborhood Plan (Figure [I-8, pp. I-15-17](#))
 3. Potential for Urban Agriculture District (Zoning Code [MGO 28.093](#))