

Legislators told Michigan farmers in for tough times

By TIM RICHARD
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"They're usually optimists, but Michigan farmers may be facing a crisis due to low corn prices and suburban sprawl," a legislative committee was told.

"They're close to very, very difficult times," Ron Nelson of the Michigan Farm Bureau told the House Economic Development Committee March 2.

"Corn is selling at \$1.75 a bushel, and it costs \$2.50 to produce. Milk costs as much to produce as it sells for. It's going to be hard for farmers to pay interest on their loans," Nelson said.

"He said 'coffee house' chats indicate some are going out of business as pressure for development mounts, though they always expect this year will be good. 'Assume farmland sells for \$1,000 an acre - that's reasonable. For development, it may bring \$10,000. Many farmers are deciding to cash out and try something else.'"

Committee chair Valde Garcia, R-St. Johns, raised the subject when he said he had heard two-thirds of farmers aren't making a profit and that agribusiness is "a year away from crisis."

Rep. Patricia Lockwood, D-Fenton, said, "Urban sprawl is a threat going through many communities." Urban sprawl means the eating up of open land, particularly farmland, at rates faster than justified by population growth.

Nelson cited an unidentified farm of 160 acres that was a "cow-calf" beef operation, but now is the site of 700 manufactured houses. "It won't be long before the rest (of surrounding

farms) find it's too expensive to operate (as farms)," he said.

"For them, development makes perfect sense. It's two miles from the expressway. From the standpoint of agriculture, it makes no sense. Assessments will go up."

Proposal A of 1994 gives farmers some protection: Assessments can't rise faster than the rate of consumer price inflation. But if an aging farmer transfers the property to his children, they'll pay the higher assess-

ments dictated by the real estate market.

Nelson said the concept of governmental purchase of development rights (PDR) has potential for saving farmland, but "can we purchase PDR for the entire state? There's not enough money."

Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties have inaugurated PDR programs to save farms, but Washtenaw County voters last year rejected the idea.

Nelson was asked when the state Jobs Commission, successor to the Department of Commerce, has done for farming. "The Jobs Commission is locked into new jobs," Nelson replied, but is doing less for in-state job transfers.

In other testimony before the House panel:

■ Kristi Clemens of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce said there's a shortage of skilled workers for a "techno-

gy-driven global marketplace," and a need for government to ease business expansion in "brownfields" older cities.

■ Peter Kuhnmuensch of the Michigan Retailers Association praised lawmakers for cutting the personal income tax rate from 4.4 to 3.9 percent over five years, but he called for reform of Michigan's "stagnant pricing" law because of the high cost of marking the price of every item. "It frustrates retail investment in

Michigan, which is by far the most onerous state."

■ Barry Cargill of the Small Business Association of Michigan opposed raising the state minimum wage beyond the federal level, supported state legislation to pre-empt Detroit's "living wage" ordinance, and called for eliminating the "prevailing wage" law requiring payment of union scales in government contracts.

Renowned climber to speak at Hills campus

Oakland Community College presents Bloomfield Hills attorney and expert mountain climber Lou Kasischke on Monday, March 15, at the Orchard Ridge Campus in Farmington Hills. Kasischke's talk begins at 7:30 p.m. in the campus' Smith Theatre. Admission is free and the public is invited.

On May 10, 1996, Kasischke nearly conquered Mt. Everest, coming within 400 vertical feet of the summit, before deciding to turn back because of adverse conditions. Eight people died that day, and several others were permanently injured, making it the worst disaster in Mt. Everest's history. Kasischke's talk will revolve around the themes of teamwork, trust, decision-making and character.

The program is sponsored by the Academic Literacy Program of Oakland Community College. For further information call Professor Cari Rummel at (248) 340-6766.

The Orchard Ridge Campus is located at 27055 Orchard Lake Road, just south of I-696. Free parking is available in nearby student lots.

OCC will host symposium

The Womencenter at Oakland Community College's Orchard Ridge Campus will host its annual "A Call to Wholeness" conference 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, April 17. Admission is \$35 and includes lunch.

"A Call to Wholeness" raises issues that challenge women's lives. An interactive keynote address by Susie Symons, a therapist, creative writer and artist, will feature activities such as reflection, writing, storytelling symbol creation, collective learning and ritual.

The conference is sponsored by the Womencenter, a college facility that provides educational and supportive resources for area women.

Preregistration is advised. For a brochure or additional information on "A Call to Wholeness" call the Womencenter at (248) 471-7602.

The Orchard Ridge Campus is located at 27055 Orchard Lake Road, just south of I-696 in Farmington Hills.

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