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EDITOR'S PICK

## Board seeks funds to turn Fayetteville farm into incubator and educational center

By Sarah Plummer Register-Herald Reporter Nov 2, 2016



FAYETTEVILLE — The Fayette County Farmland Protection Board will seek grant funding to turn the 84-acre Whitlock farm into a local farm incubator, offering training, resources and leased land to new farmers.

The board purchased the farm at public auction on April 27, 2016, for \$495,000. The group will place an agricultural easement on the acreage, preventing it from being developed for non-agricultural purposes in the future.

On Tuesday the Fayette County Commission approved a letter to the Farmland Protect board, praising its decision to develop an incubator farm, offering support for the grant application.

Fayette County Resource Coordinator Kelly Jo Drey said the lack of affordable farmland, lack of access to food distribution systems, lack of knowledge and the high cost of investing in farm equipment makes it hard for new farmers to have a solid start.

"The Whitlock property is on W.Va. 16, close to U.S. 19 and Fayetteville. That makes it an ideal location to attract young farmers to the area. The location is convenient for farmers to live in Fayetteville or Oak Hill, and our area is vibrant. It's a place people want to come to anyway. This will make it easier for them to come, start farming and have access to recreation and other aspects of quality of life," she said.

She also sees a unique synergy between agriculture and tourism, through potential for agro-tourism

as well as restaurants seeking local produce for their fresh fare.

"A lot of our restaurants are wanting to provide locally grown food throughout the season," said Commissioner Denise Scalph. "This whole concept would be a real shot in the arm for Fayette County. It might night happen overnight, but it offers really good economic possibilities for Oak Hill, Fayetteville and Wolf Creek Industrial Park."

Drey said the first step will be for the board to work with Downstream Strategies, an environmental consulting group, to seek funding for a required feasibility study. They will seek funding through the U.S. Economic Development Administration's POWER Initiative.

The project is ideally situated to be part of an Appalachian Regional Development's burgeoning regional food system that stretches from Abington, Va., to Dayton, Ohio.

Although the feasibility study will reveal exactly how the project fits into the context of what other groups are doing in the region, Drey said the project is expected to mirror what is happening in Greenbrier County at Sprouting Farms: Appalachian Croft and Resourece Center, which has just recieved an Appalachian Regional Commission grant to implement their plan.

"We are in a good location to collaborate with them, and they are anticipating there will be more demand for the services they are providing then they can meet," Drey said.

The Whitlock project could offer apprenticeship and business accelorator programs, a crofting and land access/lease program, mentorship and educational support, a resource sharing program for are farmers, and a production component to anchor quantities for wholesale markets.

The The Fayette County Farmland Protection Board is funded through a small portion of the county's property transfer tax. They collect around \$100,000 a year through property sales.

Generally, the board purchases agricultural easements for landowners who wish to protect their farmland from urban development.

The Whitlock Farm purchase is the first of its kind in Fayette County and one of only a few similar purchases across the state.

The state passed a law to allow counties to create farm boards in 2004. Fayette County's was forme

in 2006 by the Fayette County Commission and is one of only a dozen in the state.

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