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In Windsor, a future born of its past

Threat of annexation looms large over ag community

By Joe Pruski

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As town of Windsor officials continue their public information campaign ahead of a Nov. 3 referendum on incorporating as a village, they look to the future with one eye firmly planted on the past.

The town's multi-faceted rationale for incorporation begins more than a century ago and is deeply rooted in Windsor's agricultural heritage. It goes something like this: The town of Windsor's history and identity has been shaped by its agricultural community, and if the town of Windsor

continues to lose lands to annexation, or worse, ceases to exist, that identity will be lost.

Windsor falling off the map is not an existential fear – it has happened to other towns in Dane County. In 2036 the town of Burke will be swallowed by the incorporated cities of Sun Prairie and Madison and by the village of DeForest. It will be gone in 21 years and the people from Burke will no longer live there. In 100 years it will be a distant memory for most – the place their families lived but that they won't find on a map.

Windsor town supervisors were cognizant of this fact when they decided to begin the process of incorporation by lobbying the state legislature to include language allowing them to incorporate as a village in the biennial state budget passed this summer.

Citing the towns of Madison, Blooming Grove, and Burke, Windsor Town Chairman Bob Wipperfurth acknowledged, "We didn't want to be the next one."

Incorporated municipalities like cities and villages have special statutory rights allowing them to annex portions of unincorporated lands. Since its founding in 1847, the town of Windsor has shrunk from more than 23,000 acres to a little over 18,000 as of 2010 – a loss of eight square miles. When current boundary agreements with Sun Prairie and DeForest expire in the coming decades Windsor will cede more acreage to its neighbors whether the upcoming referendum is successful or not.

This fact, along with the likelihood

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Photo by Joe Pruski

A sign alerting travelers that they are about to enter Windsor's Agricultural Enterprise Area.

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that any future boundary agreements would also mean a loss of land for Windsor, was among the reasons town Sup. Bruce Stravinski favored incorporation.

"[The 2010 boundary agreement] is when I realized that any future boundary agreements would involve land losses for Windsor. The only way to protect our future is to incorporate," Stravinski said.

Stravinski described Windsor's identity as both urban and rural and said its uniqueness comes in the harmony between the two.

"We offer many of the amenities of a village, but also work diligently to keep taxes low, like a town," Stravinski said. "We see the need to protect the rural character of Windsor through a continued commitment to productive agriculture."

Windsor's agricultural history has played a major role in shaping what the present and future Windsor will look like. The town's agricultural enterprise area (AEA) has often been compared to its business park by town officials. Local farmers, those officials say, have invested millions of dollars in their farm operations and are a major economic driver in the area.

Much of the land subject to annexation in recent decades has been farmland. Protecting the security of farmers' future operations is paramount to the town.

Former town chairman Alan Harvey said that farming is often overlooked as a major economic asset in the area. He said that the town's actions to protect that asset have been noted throughout the state.

"Windsor has been very creative in the area of land use policy making. It has a

Sup. Alan Buchner's trailer and signs have been parked throughout the community in recent weeks.



Photo by Joe Pruski

statewide reputation for good solid land use planning," he said, adding that the town "has been a leader in agricultural preservation."

Harvey, like many residents, has lived in Windsor his entire life. His family roots in the area date back to the mid 1880's and are entrenched in the agricultural community. Himself an attorney, Harvey said the town owes it to its farmers to make certain their operations are safe from future annexations.

Many of the larger annexations and subsequent legal battles between Windsor and its neighbors occurred while Harvey was chairman.

He said that while the boundary agreements were an important step in securing Windsor's border, he favors incorporation as the long-term solution.

"Boundary agreements have a finite length. Clearly it is time that Windsor be viewed as its own viable



"The only way to protect our future is to incorporate."

Bruce Stravinski
Windsor Town Supervisor

independent entity. The changes (annexations) that have occurred in the fabric of the area made it clear that Windsor would have to take legal steps to secure its future or inevitably be treated like a land bank," Harvey said.

Wipperfurth, also a life-long Windsor resident, said that talk of incorporation has been around for many years, but that the town's "neutral" relationship with neighboring communities since the 2010 boundary agreements have made this a unique time in its history

to put the question to the residents.

"This was really driven by the boundary agreements. We didn't want to get to the end of the agreements (expiring with DeForest in 10 and 25 years and expiring with Sun Prairie in 25 years). It was a matter of timing and we felt that this was the right time," Wipperfurth said.

The timing also means that Windsor's land base will remain large enough to encourage a mix of urban and rural development, maintaining large amounts of agricultural land while

promoting industry and population growth.

"I think [incorporation] will give confidence to residents that there will not be another threat of annexation. We will never be forced to encroach into our agricultural area [because we've run out of land]," Sup. Alan Buchner said, adding that Windsor's agricultural area is "near and dear to my heart."

Land annexation was an emotional issue for many of the people interviewed for this story. While the law was on the side of the incorporated municipalities seeking lands from their unincorporated neighbors, the process left a bad taste in the mouths of many.

"[DeForest] was legally entitled to [annex], but was it neighborly?" Wipperfurth opined. "I want to learn from history and not have history repeat itself. [The relationship] needs to be on equal footing."

Wipperfurth, who served as a town supervisor from 1996 to 2011 before defeating Harvey in a town chair election, has assured neighboring unincorporated communities that an incorporated Windsor has no plans to annex their lands. In turn, those communities, including the towns of Bristol, Leeds, Vienna, and Westport have penned letters in support of Windsor's bid to become a village.

Wipperfurth said that if the Nov. 3 referendum to incorporate as a village is successful that Windsor's intention is to sit down with its neighbors and work out boundary agreements.

-Next week the Times-Tribune will explore the nuts and bolts of incorporation, from the process to the ramifications, and what it will mean for policy making within local government.