

This boils down to a battle for urban-fringe farming in a nation just beginning to shift its focus away from decades-old sprawl and toward the preservation of land for local food sourcing. And it extends beyond this college metropolis.

Two lanes of asphalt, penciled straight through a field of alfalfa, are the least of it.

The road, called Olympian Drive and already partway there (it dead-ends in a cornfield not a mile and a quarter away), comes with a price tag of at least \$30 million, depending when shovels sink into soil. The project had been shelved for some 13 years, until last summer when the scent of stimulus funds swept through the air; like hay from a hayloft.

The three-mile span would hitch up the ends of a ring around Champaign and Urbana. And it would cut in half the alfalfa field that feeds the Prairie Fruits goats, roll right past the patch of the farm where long tables are set for sumptuous feasts and bulldoze the bucolia that is the heart of the heartland.

“They’ll destroy it in essence,” says Cooperband, looking out through rows of Winesap apple trees to where the road would run. “People who come out here are stunned that this beauty exists here.”

With a herd of some 80 dairy goats, just as many kids, an orchard, six vegetable plots, a fully equipped Grade A dairy, and state-of-the-art cheesemaking kitchen, it’s easy to overlook the fact that Cooperband is a distinguished agronomist, and a composting expert besides.

She was a tenured professor of soil science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison when she moved in 2003 onto the storybook farm, with its log cabin and wrap-around porch, just two miles north of Champaign and Urbana. Until March she was teaching in the extension program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (Jarrell recently retired as a professor of natural resources and environmental science at U. of I.)

But now Cooperband has hung up her academic robes. Lately she’s a round-the-clock goat herder, organic farmer and artisan cheesemaker.

By day, she tends the goats, a blithesome mob of floppy-eared Nubians and no-eared LaManchas; hand-crafts 12 different small-batch cheeses; and takes orders from upscale markets, organic groceries and five-star Chicago restaurants. By night, she keeps an ear out for those goats and juggles those orders, even plays local distributor, hopping in her Honda Civic Hybrid to drive that cheese wherever it needs to be.

On summer weekends, she works the farmers markets from Urbana to Oak Park, where folks wait in line to snatch up her Little Bloom on the Prairie (a creamy camembert-style cheese), her Moonglo (a raw milk, washed-rind tomme-style cheese) or, if you get there plenty early, her chevre with *herbes de Provence* (the rosemary, basil, lavender, thyme and marjoram all organically grown on her farm).



Olympian Drive currently dead-ends a mile and a quarter west of Prairie Fruits Farm. The proposed extension would put it 50 yards away. ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO



From May to December the farm hosts al fresco dinners showcasing farm-fresh produce, locally sourced meat and, of course, cheese. BETH ROONEY / SPECIAL TO TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

From May through December, she hosts five-course, locally sourced, organic farm dinners (“high-end rustic food,” one of her kitchen staff calls it), served under the setting sun and evening stars that stretch across the wide central Illinois sky.

The acclaim spills way past the state line. Williams-Sonoma, no slouch in the fancy food department, showcased one of Prairie Fruits’ goat cheeses in last year’s holiday catalog, and Bon Appetit magazine singled out its fruits, its cheese *and* its farm dinners, making it the only Midwest cheesemaker to earn such a mention.

In recent months Cooperband has had to add one more chore to her long list of farm to-dos: She’s fighting with all her brainpower — and a good dose of grass-roots banding together — the two-lane road that’ll run just 50 yards south of where the farm dinners are served and through two other working family farms that date back to the Civil War.

She’s up half the night writing commentaries for the local newspaper, posting appeals on the Internet, speaking out at city council meetings and various public hearings, and even sitting down one-on-one with decision makers, trying mightily to get the Powers That Be to understand just how wrong the road is.

“We’re up against Goliath here,” is the way 50-year-old Cooperband sees it.

Goliath in this case would be no less than the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, the Champaign-Urbana Economic Development Council and the Champaign Chamber of Commerce. Oh, and the city of Urbana, too — specifically second-term Mayor Laurel Prussing, a regional economist by training who has been known to refer to Cooperband as simply “the Goat Lady.”

The way the mayor and company see it, Olympian Drive is a road that has long

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— Leslie Cooperband

been sketched into regional transportation plans and will relieve traffic, provide a bypass around Urbana and bring jobs, along with light industry, to the north end of town.

“First of all,” said the mayor, in a recent telephone interview, “if it takes 60 years to get a road built, you’re not exactly indulging in wild sprawl.” The unfinished stretch of Olympian Drive, she says, is a gaping fill-in-the-blank. “If you look at a map, it’s like a Pac-Man. The upper quadrant of road is missing.

“People who say we don’t need roads anymore are not thinking straight,” adds Prussing, who argues that she’s every bit as environmental as the road’s opponents, tracing her long green roots to 1971, when she was a founding member of HIPS, Housewives Interested in Pollution Solutions.

“If they want to go live someplace else and dig roots and pick berries,” says the mayor, “they can go and live someplace else.”

After all, says Prussing, it’s “just 77 acres” that’s slotted for road, though other estimates put the figure at about 85. “Nobody will be forced to stop farming.”

True enough, but with two lanes of cars and trucks, tractors and combines slicing straight through the alfalfa field — speeding and spewing and spitting out road junk — Cooperband says, “It’ll destroy the essence of the farm, ruin the rural nature, change the character forever.

“It feels like country out here,” she muses, as she ladles snowy white curds out of a Dutch-made pasteurizer — a stainless-steel vat double the size of an old wringer washer — in the sterilized cheese room. “But we’re just four minutes from the city.”

It is that very proximity, the fact that they farm on the urban fringe, that puts them — and so many other last-stand farmers — in the surveyors’ cross hairs.

Cooperband is but one of a new breed of thinkers who insist: “You shouldn’t view agricultural land as a blank slate, idle and waiting for someone to come along and buy it. To put up houses or build an industrial park. There’s this whole mindset that agriculture isn’t a valid use of the land.”

Fact is, that equation is already being shoved aside by plenty of folks, rural and urban, who argue that close-in farmland ought to be stamped super-ultra-prime.

They crunch the same numbers as Ur-

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