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bana's mayor and come up with quite another sum.

"I imagine in an area with an abundance of riches — with miles and miles of the world's best farmland — losing a little bit might not seem significant. But I think that's short-sighted. Which is why people who realize what's coming out of Prairie Fruits Farm might see it in a little different way," says Greg O'Neill, the owner of Pastoral, an artisan cheese shop in Chicago, the first to make room in its cheese case for Cooperband's chevre.

"These are not yeoman farmers. These are true Renaissance people," says O'Neill.

"Unconscionable," is how small-farms advocate Terra Brockman sees what would be the road's "rude intrusion of noise and cement and commerce" on the pastoral life of Prairie Fruits Farm and the other farms in or along its path.

"We know exactly what's at risk here because it's been happening since post-World War II with ring roads, then strip malls and then the housing developments. Or the big-box store with the parking lot. It's called development, but really it's sprawl," says Brockman, founder of The Land Connection, an Evanston-based nonprofit that preserves farmland, trains farmers and supports local food. "It's lost forever. They're never going to jack-hammer the parking lot to rebuild the farmland."

The dark-chocolate soil of central Illinois ranks among the very best in the world, right up there with that of Ukraine and the pampas grasslands of Argentina.

Every year, records show, some 600 to 2,000 acres of this purebred earth in Champaign County are chewed up and spit back out by bulldozers and road-paving behemoths. According to the American Farmland Trust, which tracks these things, two acres of farmland are gobbled up every minute in this land-hungry nation. That amounts to slightly more than 1 million acres a year, or a plot of lost farmland as big as 1.3 Rhode Islands.

Illinois ranks fifth in the list of states surrendering farmland.

But the paradigm is shifting, and going forward we might not be so quick to binge on the nation's farmland, says Deanna Glosser, a Springfield-based planner who wrote a white paper on regional food planning for the American Planning Association in 2007.

As a nation, she writes, we are starting to grasp the implications of not preserving farmland, especially at the urban fringe. We're figuring out that food production is not endless, and it depends, in the end, on "protecting prime agricultural land."

It's that brand of forward-thinking that has propelled Cooperband to keep up her fight, despite the mud balls lobbed on her fields. Cooperband counts among her compatriots the multigenerational farmers to the east and west and south of her fields, the hundreds of locals who flock to



Cooperband swapped a career as a soil scientist for that of a cheesemaker. Her small-batch artisan cheeses have been acclaimed by Williams-Sonoma and in the pages of Bon Appetit. ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS



A herd of about 160 goats and kids is the heart of Prairie Fruits Farm. The alfalfa they are fed is grown in an adjacent pasture through which the proposed road is slated to run.

the farm's Saturday breakfasts, big-city foodies and plenty of university folk.

They have an ally: Alan Kurtz, who doesn't just hold a seat on the Champaign County Board but is also vice chair of its environment and land use committee.

The way he sees it — and he researched the heck out of it — it's a \$35 million road to nowhere, without ways to get on or off for the whole three-mile stretch. And frankly, he says, there's no money to pay for it, not in cash-strapped Illinois.

"We can't keep eating up our best fine farmland. We can't just willy-nilly gobble up more," says Kurtz, a native New Yorker

who moved to Champaign 31 years ago.

"When was the last time you saw a parking lot on I-74?" he asks, of the interstate that edges north of the cities. "Try the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn. Day and night, 24/7, it's bumper-to-bumper."

Kurtz says he was "inundated" by voters opposed to the road, nearly 200 e-mails, the "biggest response" to an issue since he was voted into office two years ago. He insists that moving ahead with the \$5 million allocated for design and public engagement — as is the case after the Urbana and Champaign city councils recently unanimously approved such a move — is a "huge waste of dollars and

time."

At least for now, Kurtz is not alone on the County Board in his opposition to the road. "That's why they pulled it from the agenda," he says. "They could sniff in the wind that we'd vote it down."

For her part, the mayor says, "I'm just waiting for the (farmers) to come back to me in 20 years, and thank me for this road that helped their business. I think it will."

Till then, the mayor plans to plow ahead. She's hoping for more funds from Washington and Springfield. And she'll wait till after November elections to see if a change of seats on the County Board will give her the critical nod.

Back on Prairie Fruits Farm, Cooperband as always has plenty on her cheese plate. She's mulling whether to get a vote on the ballot, put it to the people to decide whether that road should muck up the farm works. Come fall she'll beef up the troops, make sure to muster the vote for those who'll say nope to the road.

For now, with summer just the other side of the equinox, she's got nearly 700 hungry folks signed up for those "high-end rustic" farm dinners. And week after week she's due to handcraft and deliver almost 600 pounds of prize-winning cheese.

Oh, and then there are the goats. That twisty-necked kid, the one who nearly got stuck in ol' Chippy, he spends long days now chomping alfalfa, out where the road hasn't come.

"He's growin' like a weed," says the midwife professor, with more than a hint of pride.

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