

# The Frederick News-Post

## Interesting idea on forest protection

June 9, 2019

County Councilman Kai Hagen has come up with an intriguing idea to protect more forest land in Frederick County by paying farmers and landowners not to cut down trees. Hagen suggested allowing the county to purchase easements as part of a county-run agricultural preservation program called the Installment Purchase Program (IPP). In an interview with News-Post reporter Steve Bohnel, Hagen said his goal is to permanently preserve forested land on agricultural property. The county has agricultural preservation programs and programs to preserve forested land, so it makes sense to incorporate forested land into IPP easements, he argued.

“Why not, as part of the process, identify and delineate significant forested parcels on those properties and to some extent ... have it as part of the negotiation and the agreement to include that forested parcel?” Hagen said. Why not, indeed. The IPP is designed to protect farmland from residential and commercial development. The same thing could be done to protect forest from agricultural development.

The importance of maintaining forests cannot be overstated. The World Wildlife Fund states on its website: “We depend on forests for our survival, from the air we breathe to the wood we use. Besides providing habitats for animals and livelihoods for humans, forests also offer watershed protection, prevent soil erosion and mitigate climate change. Yet, despite our dependence on forests, we are still allowing them to disappear.” The IPP was started by the county in 2002, and it has purchased easements that are now protecting almost 20,000 acres from development. The county’s website said the program works through the county’s bonding authority. The county negotiates with the landowner on the value of the easement, and then buys it at current prices. Rather than giving the farmer a lump sum, however, the county invests in a zero-coupon bond that will mature in 20 years. The landowner receives annual interest payments that are tax-free, and receives the lump-sum principal payment at maturity.

The installment plan makes the process less expensive for the county, while giving the landowner a fair return for foregoing development rights. Council President M.C. Keegan-Ayer (D), Vice President Michael Blue (R) and Councilman Phil Dacey (R) all told our reporter that they supported Hagen’s idea. Richard Grossnickle, a member of the county’s Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, said he was open to exploring the idea. Grossnickle said that woodlands on the properties where an easement has been

granted in the IPP are already protected under the program, since they are within the applicants' boundaries. It is true that those woodlands are protected from development, but it is not clear that they must be kept in their current state. That is the primary benefit of the Hagen plan and the most important reason to support it: Protected woodlands could not be cut down to create new areas for planting crops. "When you look at the green infrastructure benefits of forests, in terms of stormwater management, water filtration, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, it's important to do what we can to preserve as much as that forest as possible," Hagen said. Hagen said he was not certain yet if he would introduce the change, or see if it can be done administratively, through the executive branch. Keegan-Ayer, however, said that any changes to the program would probably require legislation. We agree with the council president. This is a significant change to the program, and the council should revise the current law to make it happen. It will need to think through many issues, including how the forest would have to be maintained and protected, and what use the landowner could make of the land, if any. This is a good idea, but it is not yet a fully crafted program. We encourage Hagen to continue working on it.

**Source:**[https://www.fredericknewspost.com/opinion/editorial/interesting-idea-on-forest-protection/article\\_1f5ae80d-ed22-5b06-93f8-d97b3c72061a.html](https://www.fredericknewspost.com/opinion/editorial/interesting-idea-on-forest-protection/article_1f5ae80d-ed22-5b06-93f8-d97b3c72061a.html)