

Western Washington county looks to farmers for advice

Pierce County resurrects agriculture commission

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Pierce County, Washington's second-most populous county, has appropriated \$25,000 to re-establish an agriculture commission to advise county policymakers.

Reviving the commission, axed during the recession several years ago, will help county leaders understand the challenges faced by the small percentage of the population in commercial agriculture, vegetable farmer Rosella Mosby said.

"The disconnect is real," she said. "Anything that has some influence on agriculture should be run through an agriculture commission."

The Farm Bureau, at the county and state levels, advocated restoring the advisory board partly in response to a debate in Pierce County over how much land should be designated "agricultural resource lands."

Environmental groups said increasing the number of acres with that label would protect farmland from urban sprawl. Some farmers said that zoning — a mixed bag of benefits and restrictions — may preserve farmland, but it wasn't enough to preserve the business of farming and complained about not being consulted.

After spending \$230,000 on a planning consultant's report last year to help it sort out the issues, the county council recently kept the number of acres designated for agriculture the same.

The episode was confus-



Courtesy of Mosby Farms

Workers harvest rhubarb at Mosby Farms, which produces vegetables in Pierce and King counties in Western Washington. The Pierce County Council has approved funding to re-establish an agriculture commission to advise policymakers.

ing, unproductive and may have been avoided if the county council had an advisory board made up of farmers, said agricultural consultant Daniel Muir, a Pierce-King Farm Bureau board member and also manager of his family's wheat farm in Kansas.

"Without farmers, the public is missing information," he said. "To me, nothing was ever accomplished."

Other Western Washington counties — including King, Snohomish, Thurston, Skagit and Whatcom counties — have agriculture commissions. "An advisory board, made up of farmers and producers representing a wide variety of agricultural prod-

ucts, ag-related businesses and agricultural professionals from associated agencies, would serve the county and its farmers well," Washington Farm Bureau CEO John Stuhlmiller wrote in a May letter to Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier said.

The council adopted a proposal by Councilwoman Pam Roach in June to put the agriculture commission back in the county budget.

"We need to have an ag commission up and running to be a voice for farmers," Roach said. "It's an opportunity to shore up farmers in our area."

The county code calls for the county executive to ap-

point seven voting members to the agriculture commission. Five must be producers. Muir said that the commission should include large and small producers, and organic and conventional growers.

"Our hope would be to submit a diversified list of farmers, but the point is they would be farmers," he said.

"Not having an ag commission in this county leaves farmer at a distinct disadvantage," Muir said.

"They (county leaders) don't hear about the organic farmer who loves fish, but, by the way, that fish project, is going to crush his livelihood," he said. "That story is not being told."

Oregon ag attorney John Albert dies at 66

Lawyer was known for specializing in agricultural liens, bankruptcy law

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

An Oregon attorney known for advocating on behalf of farmers, John Albert, passed away last month at the age of 66.

Albert died suddenly in Salem, Ore., on Aug. 27 from what's believed to be a massive heart attack. A memorial service was held Sept. 8.

After graduating from law school in 1976, Albert initially took a job with the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office and then held positions in Klamath Falls and The Dalles.

He became acquainted with the financial challenges faced by farmers upon joining the Churchill Leonard law firm in 1981, where he specialized in agricultural liens and bankruptcy law.

"Ag law was not his only area of expertise, but it was a primary area of expertise," said Stephen Tweet, Albert's friend and longtime law partner.

Among his most notable cases was the bankruptcy of the seed company AgriBio-Tech in 2000, which threatened to leave many grass seed farmers unpaid for their crops.

While his farmer clients initially feared huge losses, Albert was able to recover a "fair hunk" of what they were owed, Tweet said. "There were still losses but I believe a fair percentage of the growers' claims were paid."

Agricultural liens are a crucial tool for farmers who deliver crops to companies that go bankrupt, since they



Courtesy of Sherman, Sherman, Johnnie & Hoyt

John D. Albert

secure collateral in the buyer's assets that can be used to compensate growers.

In such cases, Albert would often battle with banks that claimed to have the top priority for repayment, said Tweet. "The bank is competing with the farmer over who gets paid first, so that was a huge fight."

After a decade at Churchill Leonard, Albert struck out on his own, forming two law firms with Tweet in the 1990s. He joined the firm of Sherman, Sherman, Johnnie & Hoyt after Tweet retired in 2014.

Aside from courtroom disputes, Albert also fought for farmers in the Oregon Legislature, where he was instrumental in the passage of a law strengthening their contract protections in 2011.

Among other provisions, House Bill 2159 established a mandatory payment date for delivered grass seed and a mechanism for resolving disagreements over price.

When he wasn't delving into legal issues, Albert led an active lifestyle in his free time as a soccer referee, gardener and marathon runner.

"I couldn't have been more shocked," Tweet said of his friend's death.



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