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Eltahir: Eminent domain not her approach

CHANNING RUCKS
STAFF WRITER

OSKALOOSA — Oskaloosa City Manager Amal Eltahir is firm in her resolve that eminent domain will not be used in the city's quest to build a new South Central Regional Airport on Mahaska County farmland near Leighton.

The conversation took place Tuesday at the Oskaloosa Herald's office during a sit-down meeting requested by Eltahir and Oskaloosa Mayor David Krutzfeldt to discuss "communication strategy for Oskaloosa." During the meeting, the city officials stated plainly that eminent domain is not part of Eltahir's plan when it comes to the airport project.

"It's not being discussed, it's not proposed and it's not my approach," Eltahir says.

Eltahir added that, regardless of city council directives, she will adhere to her own "code of ethics," and that using eminent domain to acquire the farmland is not within those bounds.

"I have my own code of ethics," she says. "I don't even care if the council wanted me to go this way or this way. I will abide by code of conduct."

The City of Oskaloosa, in partnership with the City of Pella, currently owns 379 acres of Mahaska County farmland near Leighton for the purpose of constructing a new airport. The issue has been highly controversial in the community, drawing criticism from both rural and city residents who say the area simply has no need for another airport.

City officials argue that airports have been the cause of further economic development in other Iowa

communities, citing Iowa Department of Transportation statistics showing that airports in Ottumwa, Newton and Marshalltown generate total economic activities of \$9,684,400, \$5,894,900 and \$5,124,700, respectively.

Eltahir and Krutzfeldt say that the close proximity of Ottumwa's airport is not an obstacle to building a new one in the Oskaloosa area. "We know Ottumwa has an airport. We want to compete with Ottumwa," Eltahir says. "It's the portfolio of things you have."

Google Maps places the Ottumwa Regional Airport 26 minutes away from Oskaloosa. Krutzfeldt estimates that the South Central Regional Airport would be 10-15



Herald file photo

Oskaloosa City Manager Amal Eltahir speaks with Mayor David Krutzfeldt near the bandstand during an event on July 18, 2023.

See **ELTAHIR** on A2



Ayrton Breckenridge | The Herald

Jim Van Zomerens (left) stands with his daughter and grandson, Anna and Weston Schaefer, in front of the farmhouse on the property that his grandparents, Homer and Jennie Moffet first purchased in the 1920s.

THE VAN ZOMERENS: THE FREEDOM TO WORK

CHANNING RUCKS
STAFF WRITER

Editor's note: This is the fifth and final part of a five-part series on the status of the proposed South Central Regional Airport and the farmland where the government wants to build it.

Working Iowa farmland has been a way of life since the pioneer gen-

eration.

Families journeyed for miles to settle on Iowa's prairies. They carved out new lives for themselves, coaxing vital crops from the state's rich, black soil. Entire lifetimes passed at the mercy of the cycle of springtime renewal, summer growth and autumn harvest, praying for rain and safety from summer storms.

Jim Van Zomerens' family have

been making their living on a farm west of Oskaloosa — land purchased from nearby Jeff and Robert DeRooi's great-uncle, Ben DeRooi — since the 1920s.

The farm was purchased by Jim's grandparents, Homer and Jennie Moffet, and came in two parcels. The first, made up of 59 acres, was purchased on Feb. 20, 1922, according to Jim's memory. The second, a parcel of 40 acres, was

purchased on Jan. 11, 1934, also from Ben DeRooi.

Jim says the farm was perfectly suited to the Moffet family's needs, already set up to produce a variety of livestock and crops.

"They used to live south of town," Jim says. "But this farm had a house and a barn, and that's what they needed. And probably better

See **WORK** on A3

Council approves Scholte Garden Historic District designation

EMILY HAWK
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

PELLA — A new historic district has been established in Pella.

The Scholte Garden Historic District, located along Main and Broadway between Lincoln and Washington Streets, is Pella's second historic district. The designation was approved unanimously by city council on Tuesday.

To qualify for a historic district designation, properties in a geographically cohesive area must be significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture; possess integrity of location, design and more; be associated with significant historical people or events; embody characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or provide important historical information.

"The captivating history of the Garden. The architectural variety of the homes built around, and on, the Scholte Garden. The amazing stories behind the home's owners. These are some of the ingredients that fuel the Historic Preservation Commission's desire to see the Scholte Garden area honored as an Historic District," wrote Bruce Boertje, vice chair of Pella's Historic Preservation Commission. "The commemoration of Pella's unique past will surely help preserve our future."

The ordinance approved by council protects historic districts of architectural and cultural significance; safeguards the city's architectural, historic and cultural heritage by preserving historic neighborhoods; establishes review standards for the design of new construction or alteration of existing resources to "assure compatibility with the existing character of historic neighborhoods and preserve the historic integrity of the resource"; stabilizes and improves property values by encouraging reinvestment in historic neighborhoods; fosters civic pride; and protects and enhances the city's attractiveness to tourists and visitors.

New construction of single- or two-family homes, new accessory buildings for any single- or two-family homes, and additions or alterations to existing structures

See **COUNCIL** on A2

Sen. Dickey sued by daughter over vehicle title

KYLE OCKER
EDITOR

FAIRFIELD — A hearing has been set in a civil lawsuit against a state senator filed by his daughter.

The suit was filed in Jefferson County on July 5 by Korynn Dickey, the daughter of state senator Adrian

Dickey, R-Packwood, and alleges the senator forged his daughter's signature on a vehicle title form. The daughter also says Adrian Dickey had agreed to purchase her a car with "no strings attached," but placed a security lien on the vehicle without her knowledge.

In a response filed in court by

Dickey's attorney Paul Miller this week, the senator denies the allegations.

Also named in the lawsuit is Jefferson County Treasurer Mark Myers. Soon after the lawsuit was filed, Jefferson County Attorney Chauncey Moulding petitioned the court to dismiss charges against

Myers, on the grounds of failure to support a claim of civil conspiracy as the daughter charged.

As detailed in legal filings, Korynn Dickey was attending school in California but maintained a residence in Iowa three years ago. Around then,

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WEATHER

Today:
▲ High of 84, ▼ Low of 87
A chance of thunderstorms.

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INSIDE

Aaron Reutzel begins 360
Nationals defense with
prelim win.

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We can show ANY area listing!!

NEW!!

839 Fox Run Lane, Oskaloosa • \$446,000
4BR/4BA, Stunning Executive Home!!
Listed by Marcia Aalsburg 660-8400

NEW!!

1146 Clearview Dr., Oskaloosa • \$229,900
3BR/3BA, Beautiful, well-maintained home!!
Listed by Alexis Wright 569-3602

LAND FOR SALE!!
• 5 11th St. Listed for \$109,000 by Lisa Tucker
1.64-acres overlooking the 18th hole of the
Oskaloosa Golf Course
• 2008 Suffolk Rd. Listed for \$95,000 by
Lori Oaks 4.21-acres just outside of
Oskaloosa city limits on paved road
• 9th Ave. E Listed for \$72,500 by Lisa Tucker
4.82-acres along Hwy. 23 & 9th Ave. E

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NEWS

Musco to expand facilities in Osky

OSKALOOSA — Musco Lighting has finalized plans for a 74,000 square-foot office renovation and expansion, and a new 13,000 square-foot facility shop at its downtown Oskaloosa campus. It will provide space for continued growth and allow global team members and customers to come together to learn, connect, and collaborate.

“We’ve been proud to call Oskaloosa home since Principal Owners Joe Crookham and Myron Gordin started the company in 1976,” said Jeff Rogers, president and CEO of Musco. “These investments we’re making are in our team, the community, and our future. The remodel and expansion will give us the updated facilities we need for our growing team, offer dedicated space for interacting and learning, and allow us more opportunities to welcome those who partner with us on innovative solutions.”

The downtown campus is located on the southwest corner of the Oskaloosa town square. Construction is expected to start this fall on

a 50,000 square-foot addition and a 24,000 square-foot renovation. Work is already underway to build a new 13,000 square-foot facility shop at a new location west of South D Street. Construction will begin in late-2024 on a three-floor parking garage to accommodate approximately 400 vehicles. The projects are expected to be completed in late-2025. The plans will be reviewed by the Oskaloosa Planning & Zoning Commission and City Council in August.

The renovation and expansion will be a multi-million-dollar investment in the Musco team and in the community, and the company’s largest investment in facilities to-date. The improvements will feature outdoor green spaces and connectors to the other Musco buildings in downtown Oskaloosa to create a campus feel and functionality. It will also include more and improved meeting and training rooms and open areas to accommodate larger gatherings.

“I’m very proud of the addi-



Provided photo

An aerial rendering of Musco's planned campus renovations in Oskaloosa.

tion and improvements we’re making to our campus,” Rogers said. “The renovations and the expansion aren’t just about buildings and physical space. It’s a 25-year investment in our home base, our

team, and our community.”

The building addition will feature a Musco – We Make it Happen Experience Center. It will include nearly 50 years of company history, opportunities to learn about

Musco products and services, and stories and experiences that highlight projects and partnerships that make a difference in communities in more than 125 countries around the world.

STORK REPORTS

Neva Lynne Harl

Taylor Wood and David Harl of Chariton would like to announce the birth of their daughter, Neva Lynne Harl. Neva was born at 8:21 a.m. on Aug. 1, 2023 and weighed 7 pounds, 1.6 ounces. She was 18 inches long and delivered by Dr. Trish Millner.

Remy Ivy Swank

Casy and Trey Swank of Oskaloosa would like to announce the birth of their daughter, Remy Ivy Swank. Remy was born at 9:22 p.m. on Aug. 1, 2023 and weighed 6 pounds, 13 ounces. She was 18.5 inches long and delivered by Dr. Hannah Thompson.

Bowen Rusty-Michael Thomas

Mackenzie and Clayton Thomas of University Park would like to announce the birth of their son, Bowen Rusty-Michael Thomas. Bowen was born at 9:15 p.m. on Aug. 3, 2023 and weighed 8 pounds, 14 ounces. He was 20.5 inches long and delivered by Dr. Shawn Richmond.

Fewer Americans got jobs in July than expected. But a steady market suggests US may avoid recession

PAUL WISEMAN AND RODRIQUE NGOWI
AP ECONOMICS WRITER

WASHINGTON — The job market has cooled over the summer. But it’s still strong enough to defy predictions that higher interest rates would tip the United States into recession.

U.S. employers added 187,000 jobs last month, fewer than expected. But the unemployment rate dipped to 3.5% in a sign that the job market remains resilient.

Hiring was up from 185,000 in June, a figure that the Labor Department revised down from an originally reported 209,000. Economists had expected to see 200,000 new jobs in July.

Still last month’s hiring was solid, considering that the Federal Reserve has raised its benchmark interest 11 times since March 2022. And the Fed’s inflation fighters will welcome news that more Americans entered the job market last month, easing pressure on employers

to raise wages to attract and keep staff.

“This is a good strong report,” said Julia Pollak, chief economist at the jobs website ZipRecruiter. “The worst fears that people had of a painful downturn, a loss of jobs, longer unemployment durations, all those things — those are not coming to pass.”

Unemployment fell to a notch above a half century low as 152,000 Americans entered the job force. The number of unemployed fell by 116,000.

DICKEY

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Adrian Dickey bought her a vehicle as a gift with “no strings attached.” The vehicle was paid for in full, and the title was assigned to Korynn Dickey.

Korynn Dickey’s suit continues to say that Adrian Dickey obtained the title from her and told her that he would register the vehicle for her in Iowa. He never mentioned placing a lien on the vehicle, according to the documents filed by the daughter’s attorney Siobhan Briley. They further claim that when Adrian Dickey placed the lien on the vehicle, he signed Korynn Dickey’s name on the form without her consent.

On May 15, 2023, Korynn Dickey’s vehicle was totaled

in an accident, and now her insurance company refuses to pay on its policy because of the lien.

Adrian Dickey denies those allegations, stating Korynn Dickey had given her father permission to sign her name on the form. He is seeking the case to be dismissed as well as an order for Korynn Dickey to sign the insurance check over to Adrian Dickey.

Judge Lucy Gamon has set a hearing on the county’s motion to dismiss for Aug. 28 at 9:30 a.m.

In an unrelated criminal case for charges of interference with official acts, a pre-trial conference has been set for Oct. 31 in Sac County. Adrian Dickey was charged there on July 24 for allegedly being part of a group that blocked a highway during the annual RAGB-

RAI trek across Iowa. He has entered a plea of not guilty and demanded a jury.

His attorney in that case, Matt Schultz, said the charges stem from a misunderstanding.

“Sen. Dickey was riding in RAGBRAI earlier this week. He and his team took an alternate route that led them to a place where several hundred people were blocking a road,” Schultz said in a statement. “Sen. Dickey and his team were trying to get through the party of people and onto the bike trail, when a misunderstanding occurred between the senator and a sheriff’s deputy.”

Adrian Dickey, a Republican, represents District 44, which includes all of Keokuk, Jefferson and Van Buren counties, and part of Henry and Mahaska counties.

ELTAHIR

CONTINUED FROM A1

minutes away from Oskaloosa.

No studies have been conducted on the economic impact of the proposed South Central Regional Airport in Oskaloosa specifically.

“We think we’re a very good community, and we have great things that people will be interested in locating,” Eltahir says.

“We’re a smaller community. We’re safer,” she adds. “We have plenty of good water. We have good location — We have a perfect location in terms of transportation. We can sell access. We can capitalize on our location. We need to have a nicer amenity, and with the airport, provide access. We’re going to sell access by having a facility that will complete the picture.”

In the same vein, Krutzfeldt says that the airport idea was born out of a shared desire for Pella and Oskaloosa to experience community growth.

“Bearing in mind, when this [airport idea] was crafted together, the cities of Pella and Oskaloosa both expressed a desire to grow,” he says. “Amenities need to be provided in order for the regional airport to serve the

two. The reason we had the conversation was because the Pella airport is not in a desirable location, and they’ve been told they can’t expand.

“The Oskaloosa airport is underserved. It doesn’t get anywhere near what it should for activity. Therefore, close two, put one modern airport that allows for instrumentation to be used when landing in inclement weather.”

Recently, support for the new airport has dwindled in Pella, as officials turn their gaze to the possibility of investing in repairs to the already existing Pella Municipal airport.

As locally-based company Pella Corporation says it no longer supports the proposed regional airport and Vermeer remains neutral, Eltahir says the city is “not building [the airport] for Musco,” another major business in the area, but to attract new businesses to the Oskaloosa community.

In May 2023, the City of Oskaloosa announced it has plans to execute an 80/20 annexation with the 379 acres of airport land it already owns jointly with Pella, as well as the connecting portion of the Highway 163 corridor.

The city would need to obtain 80% of the land prior to annexation, and could then involuntarily annex the

remaining 20% into city limits pending approval from the City Development Board.

As of Aug. 8, 2022, 63% of the land needed for the airport project has been purchased by SCRAA, according to a land acquisition offer submitted to landowner Dave Prine by a SCRAA consultant.

Once annexed, the city would have the power to use eminent domain to acquire the remaining land necessary. The announcement spiked concerns in the community that the annexation was an indication of the city’s intent to use the power it would bring to access the needed land.

Krutzfeldt and Eltahir say in no uncertain terms that once annexed, the city will not use its eminent domain power in pursuit of a new airport. If the remaining land cannot be acquired willingly, Eltahir says that the project will be shelved until a later date when conditions change.

“The airport idea will continue, till the end of time, to be a good idea,” Eltahir says. “It will sit. That airport idea will sit until market conditions and things [change], but I think that’s not going to be abandoned.”

Channing Rucks can be reached at crucks@oskyherald.com.

COUNCIL

CONTINUED FROM A1

that require a building or demolition permit are now subject to a review process and must meet design standards of the district.

“This is the way that we can keep our community and our heritage intact,” said councilwoman Lynn Branderhorst. “It’s also a way that oftentimes some of our older homes are the affordable homes in our community, and it’s a way to keep them protected from demolition.”

Boertje said the Historic Preservation Commission has spent hundreds of hours working on this designation for the past two years through a “thorough and rigorous process” outlined in Pella’s city code. Steps to achieve this designation included approval from the

majority of property owners who live in the neighborhood, in addition to approval from the State Historic Preservation Office. The commission received signatures of approval from 64% of property owners, or 30 of the 47 who own parcels in the district.

The full history of this district has been largely untold, Boertje said.

“Scholte’s English Garden covered two square blocks, stretched from the Scholte house north to the city limits of Lincoln Street, and was lovingly and professionally maintained. For 25 years, the garden served as Pella’s first and only park, and throughout the 1800s remained an attraction that drew visitors from miles around,” he wrote.

The Scholte house and garden were built by Pella’s founder, Dominie Hendrik P.

Scholte, for his wife Maria, who was “at best a reluctant pioneer,” according to Boertje.

“As the Scholte Garden developed, homes began springing up on Main and Broadway streets across from the garden, including two that are now on the National Register of Historic Places,” Boertje wrote. “In the early 1900s, Scholte’s heirs began removing the Garden and selling building lots on the property. Many of Pella’s most prominent citizens purchased these lots on which to erect an amazing variety of homes. Many of these homes are now over a century old, and every one of those original homes still remains.”

Emily Hawk is the associate editor of the Ottumwa Courier and the Oskaloosa Herald. She can be reached at ehawk@oskyherald.com.

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NEWS

Worker shortage for dementia patients impacting care

CHRISTIAN M. WADE
CNHI NEWS

A critical shortage of clinicians and front-line workers to support increasing numbers of Alzheimer's patients is impacting dementia care, advocates say, leaving families with limited options and raising concerns about the health care system's ability to care for an aging population.

Experts say there is a desperate need to find more primary care physicians, neurologists, home health aides and personal care aides to support the increase in Alzheimer's patients expected by the end of the decade.

The rising demand comes on top of an existing staffing shortage exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when a number of long-term care workers left the profession.

While workforce shortages are affecting the entire health care sector, the impact has been particularly hard for the dementia care industry, said Doug Pace, senior director of long-term and community-based care at the Alzheimer's

Association, a Chicago-based advocacy group.

"The prevalence of Alzheimer's disease is increasing and along with it the need for the paid workforce — whether that's in diagnosing and treating or caring for those people living with the disease," he said. "Right now, both of those groups are facing significant shortages."

More than 6 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's. By 2050, this number is projected to rise to nearly 13 million, according to the association.

Meanwhile, an estimated 1.2 million additional direct care workers will be needed by 2030 to care for the growing population of people living with dementia.

"That's more new workers than any other single occupation in the U.S.," Pace said, "so the needs are obviously great."

'POOR' STATE

There are at least 20 states with dementia neurology deserts, where the ratio of neurologists to patients is expected to be 10 per 10,000 people with demen-

tia by 2025.

"We know that dementia care physicians are critical for making sure that people get that timely and accurate diagnosis," Pace said. "A lack of those folks could mean a delay in treatment or care."

In Alabama, there were 33 geriatricians in 2021. That number will need to increase by nearly 600% by 2050 in order to meet the care demands of the 10% of the projected number of people 65 and older with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Indiana had 66 geriatricians in 2021, but will need to increase that number to 897 by 2050 to meet demands, the group said.

Texas will need another 3,400 geriatricians by 2050 to meet the demand over the next three decades, while Pennsylvania will need to add another 1,500 geriatricians, according to the association.

Dr. Glen R. Finney, a Pennsylvania-based neurologist, has a grim assessment of the state of existing infrastructure to treat and care for dementia patients.

"The state is poor," said Finney, a board member of the Alzheimer's Association Greater Pennsylvania Chapter and director of the Geisinger Memory and Cognition Program.

There aren't enough memory centers to provide a clinical diagnosis of dementia, Finney said. The biggest needs are in care and support, he said.

Pennsylvania had 175,140 home health and personal care workers in 2020 but will need to increase that by 22% by the end of the next decade, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Texas, which had 320,780 home health and personal care aides in 2020, will need to increase that by 30.5% by 2030 to meet the expected demand, according to the Association.

Michigan will need to boost its personal care workforce by 25% to nearly 90,000 workers, the data shows.

WORKING FOR 'LITTLE MONEY'

Janice Guzman put her dreams of a career in criminal justice on hold to care for her 83-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's and Parkin-

son's disease. She said the pay is low and personal care workers don't get much support for the care they provide to loved ones.

"We're doing this for very little money," the Massachusetts woman said. "That's why there's a shortage of PCAs (personal care aides), why people are leaving the field because they're not paid enough."

The long-term dementia care field has been struggling for years to fill existing direct care positions, Pace said, with an estimated 64% leaving the profession annually.

In nursing homes, the percentage is much higher, averaging 99%, he said. The average personal care worker is paid about \$14.25 per hour, he said.

"It's affecting the ability for some of these nursing homes, assisted living facilities and home health care to admit new patients," Pace said. "Or in some places, closing whole portions of their buildings if they don't have enough staff."

Other advocacy groups echo those concerns and are call-

ing on Congress to take steps to boost the nation's dementia care workforce.

"The entire long-term care industry is facing a workforce crisis, which was exacerbated by the pandemic," the American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living said in a statement. "Caregivers are burned out, and long-term care providers have limited resources to compete for workers."

"To prepare for a growing elderly population, many of whom will be living with dementia, we need supportive measures from policymakers that will increase workforce recruitment and retention," the groups said.

A 2020 report by the American Public Health Association

said a failure to strengthen the dementia care workforce "will increasingly limit the ability of people living with dementia to access quality services and supports, adding to health, social and economic burdens for individuals, families and society."

WORK

CONTINUED FROM A1

quality land than south of town. The barn was set up to milk cows and work horses, and a couple of bins for oats. A hay mow, of course, and a big door for putting in loose hay."

At just under 100 acres, Jim says that although the farm is small by today's standards, it kept his grandparents plenty busy.

"It's small, of course, by the standards today, but back then it was what most people had," he says. "It kept the family busy."

Homer further diversified the operation, raising purebred Duroc hogs on the farm. He hosted auctions in his own barn, so that groups of people could come and buy his hogs. He also milked a few dairy cows.

"Every farmer back then had five or seven cows," Jim says. "The milk, back then, wasn't the main product. It was the cream."

They also gardened. "Initially, grandpa and grandma had a garden to the south of the house that was probably 70 feet by 100 feet," Jim says.

The farm was a lot of hard work, but like Jim says, "They had to feed a family."

The original farmhouse the Moffets started out with has seen a lot of family history, according to Jim. He says that all five of Homer and Jennie's children were born in the house. His mother, Mary Moffet, married her husband, Carl Van Zomeren, in that house. As Jim remembers the story, his sister was also born in the house. His grandparents, who established the family on the farm, died in the house.

Jim's daughter, Anna Schaefer, who teaches seventh and eighth grade science at the Oskaloosa Middle School, lives in that very same house with her children today.

"There's a lot of history in the neighborhood," Jim says. "There used to be a country school right where the gravel road met the old highway [between Oskaloosa and Pella]"

The school was called the Prine School, named after landowner Dave Prine's great-great-great-uncle Henry Prine, who sponsored it in 1861. It served the neighborhood until it was decommissioned in 1966, after Oskaloosa consolidated the area's one-room schoolhouses in the 1950s and 60s.

"The neighborhood kids went there in the wintertime," Jim says. "One farmer with a sleigh would take them to school, and my grandpa was part of the group that planted two rows of pine trees at the north end of the schoolyard as a windbreak."

Eventually, the responsibility of farming the land fell to Jim's uncle, Harry Moffet, who served in the military during World War II.

"I think he was at Normandy, actually," Jim says. "Because he didn't really know how to swim, but they kicked him off, and they had to get to shore somehow, and then climb, climb a wall to get up to land."

Harry's two brothers, Lee and John, also served.

When Harry left the military, he returned to Mahaska



Ayrton Breckenridge | The Herald

Jim's family stands by a sign on his property that has his father Carl's name on it.

County and took over the family farm. Eventually, Harry purchased a separate farm by Leighton, renting the Moffet family farm to a neighbor before passing the responsibility of it on to his brother-in-law, Carl Van Zomeren, who took over the operation and farmed it himself.

"We raised pigs over there too, but not the purebred hogs," Jim says. "Only market hogs."

Jim remembers from his childhood a time when an angry sow chased him across the yard and his father had to save him by shoving a bucket over her head.

Carl and his wife, Mary, had two children: Jean and Jim. Jim grew up farming what used to be the Moffet farm and is now the Van Zomeren farm since he was 12 years old. He married his wife, Mona, and they had two daughters together, Carly and Anna. In the early 1980s, he was one of the recipients of an award for outstanding young farmers in Mahaska County.

When Carl and Mary died about 10 years ago, they left the farm to both of their children. Jim bought out his sister's half, and still raises corn and soybeans there today.

These days, though, keeping the family farm alive has been a little more complicated than it was in Homer Moffet's time.

The Van Zomeren family has been fighting the South Central Regional Airport Agency's plan to build a new regional airport either on or adjacent to their land for 12 years. Though the plan seemed surreal to them at first, it has escalated into a legal battle that, to Jim, feels endless.

"At first, we couldn't believe it," he says. "We thought we could just take care of it by saying 'No thanks.' And then progressively it's gotten handled by lawyers on their side that think of another way to try to do it, and it just seems like there's no end. And it seems like they're willing to do whatever."

SCRAA, originally formed by a 28E agreement between the City of Pella, the City of Oskaloosa and Mahaska

County, has persisted in its efforts over the years to acquire the necessary land for a new airport. In June 2022, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that the 28E binding Mahaska County to the group was unconstitutional. The Mahaska County Board of Supervisors soon voted to leave the agreement, leaving the cities of Pella and Oskaloosa with 379 acres of Mahaska County farmland purchased with the intent of constructing the airport.

In August 2022, Jim received a letter from Todd Muehlich, a consultant to SCRAA, offering \$432,800 to purchase 26.67 acres of his land for the airport. He also received an acquisition contract. He did not accept the offer.

Not only does the future of his family farm matter to Jim, but his safety does, too. Because of the location of the proposed runway, building the airport would require the closure of farm-to-market route 220th Street, a vital alternative to Highway 163, which is dangerous for farmers driving slow-moving machinery to and from their fields. Jim says that he has been rear-ended twice on 163: once in his pickup truck, and once hauling two farm wagons.

Alternatives to the route

have been discussed, including doing work on 235th Street, but the Van Zomeren aren't convinced that it will be a suitable alternative for farm equipment.

"The issue of safety on this piece of highway within three, four miles of us...this is crazy," Jim says.

"I take [235th Street] to my other job, and it's got hills, and it's narrow," he says.

The family's experiences at public meetings about the airport have been frustrating for them. They say that the boards don't often engage with them when they attend meetings to address them or ask questions.

"The SCRAA board will sit at a meeting and just look at us and hope that we believe they're actually having a meeting," he says.

For the Van Zomeren, the airport fight is multi-generational and resonates with their daughter Anna too.

"I want people to realize that it doesn't just affect these farmers," she says.

"This isn't just affecting my dad," she adds. "We're talking about the property that I live on. The property that I will inherit. The property that I will farm. Even if I don't farm it with my bare hands, I'm planning on renting it. I'm planning on keeping it. I'm

planning on passing it down to my kids."

The long years of fighting the project, though, have left the Van Zomeren feeling helpless in the face of a board that won't engage.

"He feels helpless," Mona says. "And what can he really do? What can he really do? The only thing we could do was throw money to an attorney to take the supreme court thing, and it's been thousands and thousands of dollars."

The family remains skeptical of the city's argument that the airport is necessary for Mahaska County's economic development and would be an asset to the community.

"More and more," Anna says. "People are wanting to get away from really busy places. There is a certain kind of person that is drawn to the suburbs of Des Moines because they like being that close to all the amenities of a city. However, I think there are more people who are going to be drawn to a simpler way of life."

"They always talk about

small-town charm, and people want to get their kids away from larger cities to raise them. So I think more and more people will want that," she adds.

City Manager Amal Eltahir has said that having a new regional airport close to Oskaloosa will add to the city's "portfolio" and make it a more attractive choice for people and businesses to relocate to. Anna says that Eltahir has also said having an airport close will make Oskaloosa more competitive when it comes to winning government grants.

"Basically, it feels like the goal of the airport is then to look a certain way so that our government will give a grant for more stuff," Anna says.

The Herald contacted Eltahir for a comment and did not receive a response in time for publication.

But the Van Zomeren are passionate in their defense of farming as a way of life in Mahaska County.

"It's how our country started," says Mona. "We got started on the backs of farms. It's how Oskaloosa came to be."

It's the tradition of the Van Zomeren family, though Jim says that his relatives didn't farm for legacy, but for the sake of hard work and providing for their families.

"Dad or any of my past relatives never sat me down and said 'Here, we're working hard for this, and we just want to keep it in our history, from here way forward,'" Jim says. "They just simply worked hard and knew what they were producing was important, and they worked as hard as they had to to make it happen. It wasn't that they were so proud to be an owner of land. It's just, they were so fortunate to have the freedom to work hard in whatever way it took to feed a family and move forward."

"The farmers we're talking about, none of them are huge farmers," he adds. "They're just, they're family farms doing what they grew up doing."

Channing Rucks can be reached at crucks@oskyherald.com.

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