

Program seeks to preserve farmland

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The leader of a new cropland conservation program appeared in Dubuque this week to introduce the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust.

Suzan Erem, founder of SILT, met with local community and environmental leaders Friday at the offices of the Greater Dubuque Development Corp. She said the nonprofit land trust was created to preserve the state's agricultural resources.

"It was created to protect land to grow healthy food," Erem said. "We are going to take the price of land out of the equation for the next generation of farmers."

SILT participants will donate land or protect it with permanent restrictions, called easements, before it is paved over for development or plowed under by a larger farm. In return, the group will ensure land is used for food production.

Landowners can choose to donate all or parts of their farms and can continue to live on their land for as long as they desire. Erem said more than a dozen landowners already have expressed interest in donating land or easements, representing 1,500 acres across the state.

Erem said Friday that Iowa imports 94 percent of its food.

"That's a sin," she said.

There are plenty of people who want to reverse that trend, Erem said.

"We have an entire generation of Iowans who want to come back to this state, who want to stay in this state and grow healthy food for their own communities," Erem said. "They can't gain access to farmland. It's either under pressure of development or under pressure of commodities prices. Either way, it's priced out of range for young people."

Young farmers are vital to the continued success of agriculture in Iowa, according to Iowa state Rep. Chuck Isenhart, D-Dubuque.

"The greatest generation (of farmers) is passing now," he said. "How do we dispose of that land properly?"



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Suzan Erem

Through young people. Rural economic development depends on young people. They are our future."

Erem said more than half of Iowa's farmland is owned by people older than 65 and one-third by people older than 75.

Over the next two decades, 70 percent of the country's farmland -- about 400 million acres -- will change hands, according to Carolyn Scherf, a local foods coordinator with the Iowa State University Extension of Dubuque County.

"With volatile land prices in Iowa, it's a challenge to ensure that farmland is accessible to the next generation (of) farmers, particularly those wanting to meet our need for healthy food," Scherf said.

"Dubuque can be a food hub that includes the two neighboring states. It's all there."