

A struggle over hog confinements: Economy, jobs, health and quality of living just a few of the issues involved: Veterinarian hopes to open three operations near Cedar Rapids

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ST. EDWARD -- Veterinarian Jim Pillen of Columbus is analyzing what he'll do next in his attempts to open three hog confinement operations near Cedar Rapids.

Although Boone County commissioners gave conditional permits March 18 for two of the three, a list of 20 conditions must be met. The permit for the third, Cedar Reproductive Center, which would have 10,000 sows and farrow 240,000 weaned pigs annually, was denied. Pillen is president of Progressive Swine Technologies (PST) of Columbus.

"We want to find out why the reproductive site was denied. We followed every rule the county had set forth. If there's something we can correct, we're going to reapply and go through the process again," Pillen said about the Boone County applications.

Two requirements among the list of 20 Boone County conditions are not required by the state -- using a synthetic liner in the waste lagoon and covering the lagoon.

"The Boone County commissioners are setting precedent for the state of Nebraska," Pillen said.

PST is involved in hog confinement operations, which Pillen calls pork production facilities, in Platte, Boone, Nance, Greeley, Wheeler, Clay and Webster counties. Each is owned by a separate partnership. PST has 200 employees, including about 45 who live in Boone County. Employees earn \$23,000 to \$60,000 annually. Pillen and Tom Spelts of PST, who grew up in Cedar Rapids, refer to employees as team members or pork producers.

Pillen already operates another reproductive center, Northern Nance, at the edge of that county just south of St. Edward. It is half the size of the proposed Cedar Reproductive Center with 5,000 sows, Pillen said. Northern Nance has 12 or 13 employees and was constructed in 1999 on a 160-acre site for \$7.5 million.

"The odor issue has been greatly abated using the latest technology," Pillen said.

The waste lagoon is lined by clay soil with a synthetic liner on top of that. Jobs at the reproductive center including reproductive technicians and farrowing technicians, who assist sows in labor and baby pigs.

Tim Leader, 26, of Genoa is the Northern Nance department head for reproduction, and Andy Borer, 37, of Albion is the farrowing team leader. Borer has worked there since 1999 and was a self-employed farmer before that. When they enter the center, employees shower and change into red jumpsuits to avoid bringing in any contaminants. Before leaving, they shower and change back into their street clothes.

Each sow has eight to nine litters of pigs and has an ear tag and tattoo. Information about sows is entered into a handheld computer. Newborn pigs get "day one processing," which includes a tattoo, docked tail and castration for males. The pigs' food, given daily at 6 a.m., is 95 percent ground corn and soybeans and 5 percent vitamin supplements.

Waste falls into a 2-foot-deep pit and is topped with 6 inches of water. Each sow's stall has its own feeder and water supply. Employees work from about 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., and a farmer checks on pigs for a few hours each night. Weaned baby pigs are sold to five families in southern Minnesota.

Pat Fitzsimmons, 37, of Cedar Rapids has worked at Northern Nance since 1999. He owns land near Cedar Rapids where one of two hog confinement units that received a conditional use permit March 18 will be constructed. He works at Northern Nance 40 hours a week as the assistant gestation department head and farms 30 to 35 hours a week on a 320-acre farm with 70 head of cattle.

Pillen, 46, was raised on a farm north of Monroe in nearby Platte County. They had 80 sows at a time.

"I grew up on a farm at the end of a pitchfork," he said. "I grew up on a farm where we had cattle, hogs and chickens."

He lettered in football at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln from 1976 through 1978.

"Football is life 101. This is life 101. In football, when you get knocked on the ground, you can lay down or get back up," he said.

He received his doctor of veterinary medicine degree at Kansas State University, then had a small-animal vet practice in Columbus and did consulting. He started PST in 1993 with a 2,500-sow operation at his parents' farm. PST is listed on www.agriculture.com as the 17th largest commercial pork producer in the United States in 2001. PST purchased a feed mill in Albion in 2001 and renamed it PST Milling Inc. It uses more than 1.5 million bushels of corn annually and supplies feed for nearby PST swine production facilities.

"My dad raised three boys, and we all went through college on two quarters of farm land," Pillen said, referring to quarter sections of land. "That option's not there today. You can't handle feeding yourself, let alone a family, on two quarters of land."

Pillen feels good about his efforts to start hog confinement units near Cedar Rapids.

"It's a whole lot better than watching that town die," he said. "If we don't have opportunities for people, how are they going to be able to stay in the Monroes, the St. Edwards?"