

Conservation calling

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RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer

Jeanette Winegarden of Cedar Falls, involved in conservation issues locally for more than 20 years, has been elected president of Iowa Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners. The former Cedar Falls City Council member has served as a county conservation district commissioner since 1986.

Soil, water group's new president hopes to bring sides together to meet challenges

By CARI NOGA
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CEDAR FALLS

Jeanette Winegarden has spent her life in Black Hawk County, but she still knows the entire state of Iowa's topography almost like the back of her hand.

That knowledge should serve the Cedar Falls native well in the next two years as president of the Iowa Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners, the office she was elected to last month. Although she's most familiar with the rolling farmland of Northeast Iowa, she can tick off a list of the conservation challenges other regions of the state face.

Northwest Iowa? Flat as can be, resulting in drainage problems. The southwest region? Originally home to cattle feeders and then row crops, livestock is now returning to the area. Southeast? Sandy soil and flat by the river, clay soil and hills further inland.

And all over the state, there's those concentrations of buildings and people in cities. Urban centers and their residents are a conservation challenge that historically have been neglected. First, they often don't understand why expertise and

dollars are spent on farm conservation practices. Second, they don't understand that with development increasingly spreading into rural areas, conservation becomes an urban concern as well.

But Winegarden, 65, as the first urban resident to hold the association presidency — to the best of anyone's knowledge — is inherently equipped to address that challenge.

"There's two reasons you need urban people. One, they have the money, and two, they have the votes," she said. "We've got to tell our story."

Winegarden's story of how she became interested in conservation dates back to her uncle's sheep ranch in Wyoming, where he also served as a local water commissioner.

"He took us up and showed us how they turned the water on for the different ranches. This was in the '30s, the Dust Bowl era, so this was real important. It made quite an impression on me," said Winegarden.

Fast-forward several decades, through high school where she discovered an interest in science. As a student at the University of Northern Iowa, she studied earth science.

After graduating in 1950, Winegarden

found there weren't many jobs where she could use that kind of education, so she went into teaching her minor, driver's education. Conservation remained an interest, however. Her first official involvement with it was as a member of the Cedar Falls City Council in the 1970s.

Back then, the state had suggested each county establish a temporary land preservation commission, and Winegarden found herself not only serving on it, but as chairwoman. The group was charged with drafting a plan for Black Hawk County.

"That was before there was a lot of development," she said. Since that study, Winegarden believes more people have become aware of the need to be involved in conservation.

"That was a big step and something I enjoyed."

Others watching the ad hoc committee apparently thought Winegarden had the right ideas, and solicited her to run for the Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District Commission in 1986.

"After I was off of the city council, a group of farmers came to me and said,

Jeannette Winegarden

Age: 65

Education: University of Northern Iowa, 1950 (degree??)

Experience: Elected to Black Hawk County Soil and Conservation District, 1986; re-elected in 1992. Joined state association board as regional director, 1992. Served as vice president of state association, 1993-1995. Appointed to National Environmental Policy Committee for the National Association of Conservation Districts, February 1995.

Family: Husband, Jim; two children; two grandchildren

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