

WINEGARDEN

Group's president seeks rural, urban cooperation

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'We feel you should ... run for commissioner,' she said.

Those farmers, who included John Miller of Hudson and George Isley of Cedar Falls, took care of nominating petitions and other election paperwork, and Winegarden was elected to her first six-year term.

"There's been an effort in the past to get urban people involved," Miller said. "She had the interest, and she had the time."

After a few years as a local commissioner, Winegarden began extending her involvements to the regional and state levels. She served as vice president of the state association the past two years, and has earned the endorsement of the immediate past president, Glenn Buresh, a Cedar Rapids farmer.

"She's constantly trying to do the right thing," Buresh said. "Whatever it takes to make soil and water conservation practices work, she's willing to do it."

He added that Winegarden has the people skills to defuse conflict and build consensus, an ability needed if cities and rural areas are to achieve conservation goals. "She tends to make allies in all fields," Buresh said.

Iowa is somewhat unique in its inclusion of cities in soil and water conservation districts, and in selecting the five SWCD commissioners during the general election. Winegarden believes that is one of its strengths, recalling a speech to the north central region of the national SWCD association, where she pushed the need to inform city residents of conservation's importance.

"They've all been so rural-oriented," she said. "I got up on my soapbox. We have to maintain our point that we need help out there to keep the conservation practices on the land."

One major definition of that "help" is money. Current state funding for cost-share conservation practices stands at nearly \$6 million. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship will ask for a \$1.5 million increase in fiscal 1997, half the amount of increase Winegarden had hoped would be requested.

But she believes the message is

starting to get through. One testimonial to her belief came earlier this month, when the Conservation Technology Information Center announced that Iowa leads the nation in no-till corn acreage, and is third in no-till soybean acreage. No-till's primary benefit is reduced soil erosion, by refraining from plowing the field bare. It also preserves water quality because there is less runoff that might carry farm chemicals away from fields.

"I really think there are more people who are becoming conscious especially of the water quality," Winegarden said. Again, however, urban residents tend to have a blind spot about how their habits — applying road salt to sidewalks and streets, gardening or even simple lawn care — can affect water quality.

"Really, the chemicals a homeowner in the city puts on are just as bad as what they claim the farmer puts on," Winegarden said.

There is less awareness in the general public about soil loss. In Black Hawk County, tolerable soil loss — what can be replaced by natural processes — is set at 5 tons an acre per year. When spread over an acre, five tons forms a layer the thickness of a dime.

While there is considerable variance throughout the county, and significant progress has been made in the last five years, there is land eroding above tolerable levels, said Mike Webster, district conservationist at the Black Hawk Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture organization the SWCDs work with regularly.

"They don't realize how tragic it is when that many tons of soil go off the land," Winegarden said.

Her mission as president will be to convey that tragedy to those who can help end it, whether it be by allocating funds, employing conservation practices on their property, or educating others. Education is particularly important. One of her pet projects is an "envirothon" program, which allows high school students to work in teams to solve conservation problems.

"I'm pushing this very, very hard," Winegarden said.

After her two-year term concludes in 1997, Winegarden plans to stay involved with conservation locally, on the Black Hawk SWCD board.

"I like the work because I feel we're doing something. We're accomplishing something."