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Concerns over the land and countryside

The political will to curb urban development of the countryside is growing in Switzerland. Even fervent environmentalists are astonished at the federal parliament's most recent decisions on the protection of the countryside.

By Marc Lettau

The soil is disappearing as development zones expand. The pressure on Switzerland's countryside has become so great that the voting public is willing to drastically curb development. On 17 June, voters in the canton of Zurich voted in favour of better protection for agricultural land and a reduction of ten square kilometres in the planned development zone. Quite a number of development projects planned for green-field sites have effectively been halted by this referendum. The outcome is surprising as the government and parliament of the canton of Zurich had clearly opposed the proposal. Though, the approval of the second homes initiative had already illustrated how much protecting the countryside is in keeping with the spirit of the times. Esther Guyer, the spokesperson for the Greens in Zurich's cantonal parliament, also shares this view. The Swiss people are tired of seeing "the countryside concreted over", she says. They

have become aware that alternative methods can be deployed based on principles aimed at greater density, greater height and increased sustainability.

The rural canton of Thurgau also plotted a new course on the same day. The people of Thurgau approved a construction law that enables the development zones to be reduced in size. This is based on an intervention in the mechanism that supports the creation of land for development. In future, landowners will profit much less from sudden increases in the value of their land when it is converted from farmland into building land. They will have to pay 20 % of the additional value generated overnight to the Thurgau treasury. The canton will use this revenue to reduce the size of existing development zones. This will require significant financial resources as landowners will have to be compensated when their land loses value after being turned from building land back into farmland.

Call for rezoning

Protection of the countryside is also suddenly in vogue in the federal parliament. During the summer session, it decided to tighten up the Spatial Planning Act (RPG) very much in line with the proposal adopted in Thurgau. 20 % of the additional value generated as a result of development zoning is to be paid to the public coffers nationwide in future. The cantons are to use the accrued revenues to reduce the size of existing development zones in a targeted manner. However, the National Council and Council of States are going a significant step further. They have decided that excessively large development zones abso-

lutely must be reduced. Anything exceeding the demand for the next 15 years must lose development zone status. This is the only way in which urban sprawl can be curbed, they say. The tightening-up of the law will hit "miscreant" cantons with large and sprawling development zones particularly hard. It is as yet unclear whether the tightening-up of the Spatial Planning Act will have to go to a referendum. The Swiss Chamber of Commerce and the canton of Valais, which has an abundance of building land, are talking about forcing a referendum.

The path taken by parliament has even left environmental and countryside protection organisations astonished. These organisations, which are calling for all existing development zones to be frozen for 20 years through their pending "countryside initiative", are talking about a breakthrough. They are even willing to withdraw their widely supported initiative if the tightening-up of the Spatial Planning Act becomes law.

The fact that parliament is showing an interest in a popular initiative and setting a compromise-driven counterproposal against it is nothing new in Swiss politics. It is just that in this case the counterproposal – the tightening-up of the Spatial Planning Act – goes further than the environmentalists' initiative. The obligation to reduce the size of excessively large development zones extends beyond the demands of the "countryside initiative". It would therefore be an easy decision for those behind the initiative to generously consider withdrawing it.

Seen and felt by almost everyone

Are the developments of recent weeks evidence of a change in trend? Hans Weiss has observed a "change in mentality" and greater "political will" to protect the countryside. His view matters because the 72-year-old was one of the pioneers of Swiss spatial planning and it was he who, together with a group of fellow stalwarts, forced the canton of Fribourg to back down in 2004 when it proposed using top-quality farmland near Galmiz for the location of a pharmaceutical plant. The success of that campaign gave environmentalists impetus nationwide. Political scientist Lukas Golder of the GFS research institute in Berne says that the issue of urban sprawl has since then unquestionably been taken on board by people in Switzerland. Everyone can see in their own area that previous efforts to protect the countryside fell short of the mark.

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Urban development is increasingly replacing the countryside – photograph from Wollerau, the commune with the lowest tax rate