

Some programs are in place to help neighbors address issues around large poultry operations, but the programs are delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. â€œIt sounds like weâ€™ve got a lot of things that are in the process and starting to be implemented.

COVID knocked us a back a little,â€• said Dell Kerbs, R-Shawnee, chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. â€œIt sounds like weâ€™re definitely on the right track to get the neighbors talking with the producers.â€• The comment came at the conclusion of a two-hour interim study meeting at the state Capitol on Wednesday requested by the Green Country Guardians, a grassroots citizen group that formed in the summer of 2018 as large poultry operations under contract with a Simmons Foods processing plant in Arkansas grew across Delaware County. Grant Hall, representing the groupâ€™s ongoing concerns, said â€œa litany of frustrationsâ€• with regulatory processes has confronted residents with no community information in advance of plans for the mega-farms with six or more barns that are 50 feet wide and 600 feet long that may grow millions of chickens per year. Grant explained when Rep. Johnny Tadlock, R-Idabel, asked him if people of the area were not prepared to have the smells and activity of agriculture operations where they live, that people who live near the operations see them more as corporate or industrial operations rather than agriculture. â€œThe problem has been a lack of any strategic coordinated processes and oversight that has allowed a materially significant expansion of these operations in a concentrated geographic area without properly understanding the economic and environment impact and the impact on residents who were already there,â€• he said. Complaints have focused on water supply and water quality concerns, as some have suspected their wells, springs and local streams are affected by nearby farms. Some have complained of respiratory issues or sold their homes and moved due to the strong smells. County roads also have not held up under construction and poultry truck and traffic and local officials say there is little they can do, he said. While the Oklahoma Department of Food and Forestry instituted setback rules for the operations in relation to towns, homes,

schools and public roads in late 2019, the majority tied to the Simmons Foods expansion already were built and critics maintain the setbacks do nothing to prevent concentrations of the farms. Teena Gunter, ODAFF Agriculture and Environmental Management staff director, said agency regulations addressing poultry operations have not been updated since 2002 and that regulations focus on poultry litter production and management rather than siting of the facilities. "Siting didn't become a concern until three or four years ago," she said. The only potential offering to answer conflicts addressed in the meeting came from Trey Lam, executive director of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission. He described the "Neighbors Helping Neighbors" project, aimed bringing together stakeholders and all the involved agencies to discuss problems and to use programs and funding provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to address specific issues. "The goal is to reduce the anger, the volume, the anxiety and to bring people together around a table," he said. While he posted listing for hundreds of thousands of dollars estimated for specific measures such as helping farmers with fan filters, commercial composting setups or manure coverings, nothing is expected to happen until 2021 due to the pandemic, Lam said. While there had been a couple of early meetings, much of the effort slowed due to the pandemic and because such meetings are difficult to carry out online in something like a Zoom meeting, he said. "The COVID crisis has gotten in the way," he said. Featured video: Let's Talk Town Hall discusses the eviction crisis Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @KellyBostian