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Leslie Cooperband raises goats and produces award-winning artisan cheese at Prairie Fruits Farm outside Champaign. Now she is campaigning to stop a proposed road that threatens to cut through land near her property and destroy the bucolic character of the farm. **ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/ TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO**



The Goat Lady vs. Goliath

Award-winning cheesemaker leads charge to say no to a road that threatens farm paradise

By Barbara Mahany
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CHAMPAIGN — On an otherwise enchanting spring morning — with hundreds of blackberry brambles being tucked into dark-chocolate soils just beyond the orchard, and endless trays of chevre being scooped out of a vat into waiting tubs in the cheeserie — Leslie Cooperband is up to her elbows in goat.

No, really. Chippy, the mama goat with “the winningest personality,” is writhing on a bed of hay in the barn, deep in the pains of labor. And clearly in trouble.

Seems the kid she’s trying to push out has twisted its neck, and the poor thing can’t budge through the birth canal.

Certainly not without major assist from Cooperband, who has slipped out of her sterile, white, cheesemaking lab coat and into navy-blue coveralls and over-the-elbow, clear plastic, obstetric gloves. She has squirted half a bottle of rust-colored

germ-killer and just as much lubricant half up the gloves and plunged in her arms, up to the elbows, to try to give Chippy half a chance at getting the kid out alive. For a hold-your-breath stretch of 32 minutes (an eternity in a birthing barn), she alternately twists and tugs, soothes and swears.

At long last, the 8-pound, 2-ounce buck emerges, floppy but plenty alive. Mama and brown-spattered son rejoice in a mad scramble of licking, a swirl of pink tongues and wet, sloppy goat.

“I’ve become a goat midwife,” says Cooperband.

Good thing. For the goats, and their sweet brand of milk, are at the heart of the award-winning Prairie Fruits Farm & Creamery, Illinois’ first farmstead fromagerie. Cooperband owns the farm with her husband, Wes Jarrell.

And, dang, if this parcel of paradise doesn’t stand to be steamrolled should Urbana City Hall complete a ring road that has been on and off the books for the last half-century.

This is no mere saga of a few endangered farms. Nor simply a wail for the loss of 85 acres of the world’s richest farmland.