

It Happened in Harrisburg

By Reps. H. Jack Seltzer (R-Lebanon) and Robert C. Rowe (R-Lebanon/Lancaster)

The Legislature has begun to search for ways to help preserve Pennsylvania's farmland, through relief from real estate taxes, and through regional planning.

Bills have already been introduced and others are being prepared, to implement recommendations of Governor Shafer's Committee for the Preservation of Agricultural Land in a report submitted December 1969. The report warned

"Nearly one-half of Pennsylvania's farmland has gone out of food production since the turn of the century. This includes 420,000 acres of some of Pennsylvania's best agricultural land which has been converted to non-agricultural uses in the past 10 years, on average of 115 acres each day. This pattern is accelerating and is likely to continue."

The Governor's Committee suggested several steps to slow down this potentially dangerous process. One calls for legislation to base farm and forest taxation

on land use rather than on market value. The Committee pointed out:

"Once an area surrounding land in agricultural use becomes developed, taxes on this agricultural land are so high that the owner is forced to sell the land for more intensive development."

A constitutional amendment has been introduced in the House and Senate to permit the General Assembly to establish standards for the taxation of land used for agricultural purpose.

The constitutional amendment process is a slow one, and this proposal could not be submitted to the voters before the 1973 Primary Election. A quicker method would be through amendment of the Assessment Law.

Chester Heim, legislative director of the Pennsylvania Farmers' Association, told an association meeting held in Harrisburg March 29 that such an amendment is now being prepared.

Other groups are also at work on this knotty and urgent problem. Norman F. Reber, editor of Pennsylvania Farmer, reported

in the February 27 issue that a tax study committee is at work in Centre County on the specifics of how to assess land used for agricultural purposes in a fair manner.

David S. Barr, the county's chief assessor, has called upon Russell Larson, dean of Penn State's college of agriculture, and other specialists to furnish him with guidelines.

One criterion suggested would be the per-acre annual rental value of land by soil type. Another is the value of agricultural buildings when used for agricultural purposes.

The Pennsylvania Farmer comments editorially "One of the appealing features of the annual rental income approach is that it is widely used in assessing such things as shopping centers, commercial and industrial property."

Our neighboring states of New Jersey, Delaware and Connecticut have moved in the direction of fair assessment of land in actual farm use. In New Jersey no farmland is being assessed higher than \$700 an acre, compared to \$5,000 to \$25,000 an acre before the State passed a constitutional amendment dealing with this question.

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So there is ample precedent for the steps which Pennsylvania is now beginning to take.

Another bill has been introduced of interest to farmers located in areas adjacent to large centers of population where

competition for available land is intense.

The bill would require a plan adopted after a public hearing as a pre-condition to agreement between counties or municipalities and landowners for the preservation of farmland, forest, water and open space. The bill would remove the requirement that an area be designated as urban by the Federal Government.

Pennsylvania farmers are encouraged that Governor Shapp's approach to this problem suggests that a bipartisan effort will be made to solve it.

has publicly supported their plea for real estate tax relief.

During an interview with a staff member of Pennsylvania Farmer last October 10 Shapp said "Farm real estate taxes should be based on the yield of farmland and not upon the assessment. Today somebody buys 100 or 200 acres in a farm area, puts up a big shopping center and all the assessments in a mile radius start rising... The taxes go up for the farmer and yet there is no increased yield from his land... forcing many farmers to sell out their property..."

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