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New Municipal Math Proponents Compute Open Space Value

There are several major economic reasons in support of a differential assessment policy for farmland, although economic reasons do not stand alone in defense of such a policy. Indeed, a proposal of this kind is nearly always subject to financial justification.

And to some non-farm

residents as well as their municipalities, the preservation of farmland and open space land is not viewed as being economically defensible. They argue that it is more of a burden to the individual tax payer than would be residential subdivisions on the same land area.

But according to what the Open Space Institute (a non-profit conservationist organization located in New York) calls "the new municipal math", the economic objection to farmland and open space preservation is in many cases groundless, and the reverse may often be true. Now widely quoted in conservationist circles, the thesis of the new municipal math is that costs for municipal services (water, sewers, schools, etc.) increase faster than do revenues from property taxes as open space land is subdivided into single family, suburban homes.

To nail down this point, the Institute asserts that in one New Jersey study the service cost of new housing was estimated to be about \$1,005 per household, requiring a dwelling and lot assessed at about \$53,000 to break even on the tax base. Few communities in Pennsylvania, or

anywhere, can anticipate subdivision activity that will produce that kind of residential rateable. The Institute concludes, "the facts are pretty much in: preserved open space is the biggest land bargain since the King of England whacked up the eastern seaboard and gave it away to his friends three centuries ago.— There is so much evidence that open space pays off handsomely for the typical suburban community, that the objectors should be saddled with the burden of proof rather than the proponents."

In addition to the potential penalties of not preserving open space, there are other economic benefits which should be considered. Generally speaking, farmland and open space land produces its fair share of property taxes in comparison to the municipal services required. It also has a positive effect on municipal revenues by generating an increase in the value of contiguous real estate, and in revenues derived therefrom. In the absence of special taxation provisions, however, usually this situation also results in concomitant increased assessments and increased taxes for farmland and open space.

Donald Harter, Ph.D.
 Area Resource
 Development Agent
 Pennsylvania State University

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FEED LETTER

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