

Land use discussed in Berks County

By JUDY MITCHELL
Berks County Reporter

READING - The land use issue got its first public airing in Berks County at a series of hearings on "Agricultural Land Preservation" held at three locations throughout the county on November 9, 10 and 11.

The purpose of the hearings as set forth in a memorandum issued by the Berks County Agricultural Land Preservation Committee appointed by the Berks County Planning Commission was to accept public testimony on two aspects of the issue, including:

"1. Should agricultural lands in Berks County be specially preserved?"

2. If so, how should the preservation process be implemented?"

The overwhelming majority of testimony presented at the first meeting held at the Metropolitan Edison Auditorium in Reading supported a yes vote on the first point in question, and a call for a show of hands near the conclusion of the hearing indicated that a majority of those present also favored the preservation of ag land in Berks. One member of the audience, however, objected to what he termed the "failure" of the hearing in considering the question of "how it should be done."

At least one other participant at the meeting expressed impatience with the absence of concrete suggestions as to how ag land preservation might be approached, commenting that "I really came here to get an education, not to talk."

County Commissioner Vernon Shaffer pointed out to the gathering that "the purpose of this hearing is not for us to tell you how we are going to do this; we are holding the hearings to try to get ideas - from the people in the audience as to how to do this."

Although individual comments seemed to suggest that many in attendance were in favor of preserving agricultural land in Berks County, many also indicated that a number of those present were wary of the "how" if it meant increased government restriction on the individual landowner.

In a telephone conversation at the conclusion of the series of hearings, Alpheus Ruth, who farms in Fleetwood R2, and who represents agriculture on the Berks Ag Land Preservation Committee, indicated his disappointment with the Reading meeting and particularly with the farmer turn-out there. He indicated, however, that he was pleased with general attendance at the hearings, particularly at those held at Conrad Weiser and Oley Valley high schools which, he said, were each attended by 100 or more persons.

Farmer attendance was best at Conrad Weiser, according to Ruth, and discussion was considerably more constructive than at Reading. Robert Manbeck and Harold Heck, both farmers in Heidelberg

township where ag land is protected by stringent zoning regulations, gave testimony which indicated that the majority of residents of Heidelberg are happy with the situation there

Heck had also attended the Reading meeting where he briefly responded to testimony made by one individual who suggested that implementation of the concept of preserving ag land would economically

disadvantage the farmer or his heirs who wished to sell their land. Heck informed the gathering at Reading that three farms in Heidelberg township have now been sold for ag use under the present zoning

ordinances "and the purchase prices received were not detrimental in value."

Ruth also expressed satisfaction with the Oley meeting, although he pointed out that like Reading, farmer attendance was poor. Feryl

Treichler of Virginville, Berks County Pomona Master, appeared at the Oley meeting to give testimony on the State Grange policy

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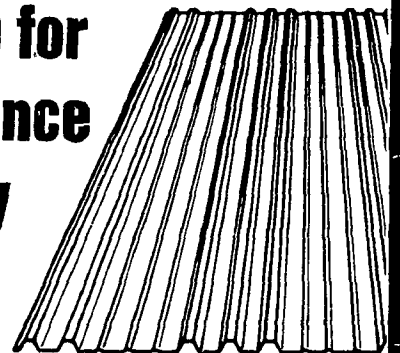
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