

Developments needn't choke farmland

By DIETER KRIEG

LANCASTER - There are ways to keep farmland from being choked off by sprawling housing developments, industrial parks, and golf courses, say land-use planning officials who have an interest in agriculture. The important first step, they say, is to become involved at meetings which are designed to survey the needs of a given community. Farmers are oftentimes negligent with such duties, land-use spokesmen say.

At a meeting here two weeks ago at the Lancaster Farm and Home Center, an estimated 80 people, including agribusinessmen and representatives from the press, listened to ideas which are being implemented in various townships to guide and control growth in their communities. The primary thrust in each case was the preservation of farmland and the farmer's way of life.

Taking part in the land-use forum were Robin Ream, area land-use agent for the Cooperative Extension Service; Bob Behling of the Lancaster County Planning Commission, and four township planning and zoning officers who consider agriculture a valuable resource. They are Isaac Eby, Clay Township supervisor; John Heisey, Mount Joy Township Planning Commission member; John Keretzman, Salisbury Township zoning officer and David Schreffler, member of the Millcreek Township Planning Commission, Lebanon County.

Asked to describe procedures taken in his township to protect farmland, Schreffler told the group that soils classification maps would be a very good tool for determining zoning needs in an area. Such surveys would determine which lands would be best suited for medium density housing, he explained.

A social studies teacher at Garden Spot High School, Lancaster County, and a member of his township's zoning hearing board, Schreffler proclaimed that land which stays in farming presents fewer tax problems than land which is developed. He used that argument, among others, to push for an agricultural district in his township.

"Farming has changed a bit over the years. It's not just a way of life anymore, it's a business." According to Schreffler it's a business which needs more attention from planners in order to protect it. Noting that urban sprawl wouldn't push an industry out in order to make room for houses, he said that neither should housing developments eliminate farms. "They're a business too," he emphasized.

Isaac Eby, a farmer from northern Lancaster County, told the group how farmers in his area were upset when a local restriction allowed farmers to keep only one animal per acre. The farmers made their objections known and are now allowed to keep two head per acre in the rural-residential zoning district.

"Why would anyone destroy a natural resource like land?" asked Heisey, who is not a farmer but claims a strong interest for protecting it and the farmers who own it. According to him, farm land is destroyed for one simple reason: Money.

"Agricultural zoning and the support of the farmer is the best interest of the consumer," the Lancaster County agent exclaimed.

Lancaster County Agricultural Agent, Jay Irwin, who served as moderator for the forum, noted the world-famous productivity of the Garden Spot's farmland and said: "We have this God-given land...we need to use this land for agricultural purposes. According to Behling, Lancaster County lost 8000 acres of its farmland per year for the period 1964-69. Since then an average of 5000 acres have been lost annually. Studies show that an average of 200 farms go out of production per year, and currently only 65 per cent of the Garden Spot's land is used for farming purposes.



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Isaac Eby
Clay Township
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"Lancaster County farmland and its farmers are an integral part of our culture and the preservation of our lands is for both aesthetic and food production values," Behling declared. In addition, the planning commission spokesman also noted that Lancaster County is in a favorable agricultural position because of its close proximity to marketing areas in the Northeast.

With zoning ordinances in effect in all but one of Lancaster County's townships, the zoning officers were each asked how their respective land-use programs stood up when they were challenged.

Keretzman, who came prepared with several detailed maps of his township, said that he hasn't come across any challenges so far. Eby reported no challenges in Clay Township. Heisey noted that threats of a challenge have come from a builder in his township. Schreffler indicated

provisions were included in the Millcreek Township plan to keep challenges from coming up after the plan was announced.

One of the repeated conclusions of the forum was that agricultural zoning is legal and explicitly authorized by the Pennsylvania Constitution. Setting aside an area for strictly agriculture-industry, as was done in Millcreek Township, Lebanon County, said Schreffler, serves six purposes:

1. Protection against further environmental degradation.
2. Protection of the area's water supplies.
3. Protection of the homogeneity of an area.
4. Prevent undesirable development "just anywhere".
5. Protects certain lifestyles and religious values of the population of an area.
6. Protect the value of agriculture itself



Bob Behling
Planning Commission
Lancaster County

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