

Four ag preservation plans weighed by Council members

BY CURT HARLER

CAMP HILL — Provisions of Amos Funk's proposal to preserve farm land by deed restrictions drew cautious praise and some fire at a meeting of the Pennsylvania Council of Farm Organizations.

Ken Greider, Executive Director of the State Association of Township Supervisors said "with a couple of amendments we could support HB 1983."

That bill would allow municipalities to establish ag districts and would encourage placing deed restrictions on farm property to ensure it would stay in agriculture forever.

But State Representative Noah Wenger, vice chairman of the House Agriculture Committee said he was opposed to any bill which was not voluntary.

Funk, Greider and Wenger appeared on a panel discussion of preservation of ag land. They were joined by Deputy Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Chet Heim.

Funk said he felt everyone — farmers, township supervisors, legislators, the Governor — favored preserving ag land.

"If everyone is in favor of preserving agricultural land, why then is not more happening?" he asked.

"The problem with Pennsylvania's land use efforts to date, as I see it, is the benefits go to everyone in the state," Funk said.

He said he had been surprised and shocked when told by several friends that a number of individuals who serve on the House Agriculture Committee do not want anything to do with land use legislation because it is too controversial.

"It also has been said if you scratch a farmer deep enough you will discover a land speculator," he said, noting farmers would like to have their cake and eat it too.

Funk called for broad land use legislation to fit the needs of counties where urbanizing pressures are not great to those where pressures are very great.

Greider, representing the Township Supervisors, pointed out that between 500 and 600 townships of 1458 in the state have zoning laws of any type.

He said he felt no bill would be able to fully guarantee that a given piece



Noah Wenger, vice chairman of the House Agriculture Committee told members of the Council of Farm Organizations he could not support any land preservation plan that was not voluntary. He was joined on the panel by Chet Heim, Kenneth Greider, and Amos Funk.

of land would not be developed.

He said a bill like HB 1983 could be supported by his organization.

But he added the Supervisors probably would not support any bill which gave a special interest group, including farmers, special treatment.

Chet Heim, commenting that he is a member of the Thornburgh administration, talked the party line on land use preservation.

He repeated the statement that any comprehensive land use plan must emphasize the farmer and the family farm.

He said any such bill would have to reduce the farmer's tax and allow him to realize some of the development potential of his land.

Heim said the administration would support local control and not state dictation of land use policy.

He said the Administration looked for legislation to compensate the farmer for any loss of property. He also said they wished to avoid the use of eminent domain or taking of prime farm land.

While a member of the Republican party, Noah Wenger had some more specific ideas to offer on his own.

"I favor voluntary ag districts with individual sale of property rights

"I stuck with the voluntary approach since property rights are one of man's basic rights," Wenger said.

He said he supported the

idea of using local money to solve local problems.

"But I don't want land use planning out of the hands of the land owner and into the hands of the planner — professional planner or not," he said.

"That would be erosion of our basic constitutional rights," Wenger said.

He said he saw land preservation as a priority issue. But he added he was not about to tell young people they could not build a home in the area or tell industry it could not expand.

He cited Hershey Medical Center as one case where land went out of farming.

"But it was not bad," he added.

Wenger said he felt the biggest problem with farmland preservation was losing the land upon the death of the farm's owner.

He said the property may be secure in farming until the owner dies and then the tax bite hurts, forcing heirs to sell off land and perhaps abandon farming altogether.

He said he is supporting HB 1176 which is appraising land on its current use and not on its potential value for other reasons.

Wenger spoke favorably of HB 1608, the Capitol Stock Tax exemption legislation.

He said incorporation is a good way to pass the family farm from generation to generation.

While the stock tax makes this prohibitive at present, 1608 would exempt a farmer from the tax provisions.

He also said amendments to Act 319 and SB 296,

recently signed into law, were valuable aids to preservation of farms.

The purpose of the discussion was to share ideas with members of the Pennsylvania State Council of Farm Organizations. Members of the group are drawn from the leaders of all farm groups in the state.

The land preservation session was one of several seminars held during the Organization's annual meeting Monday.

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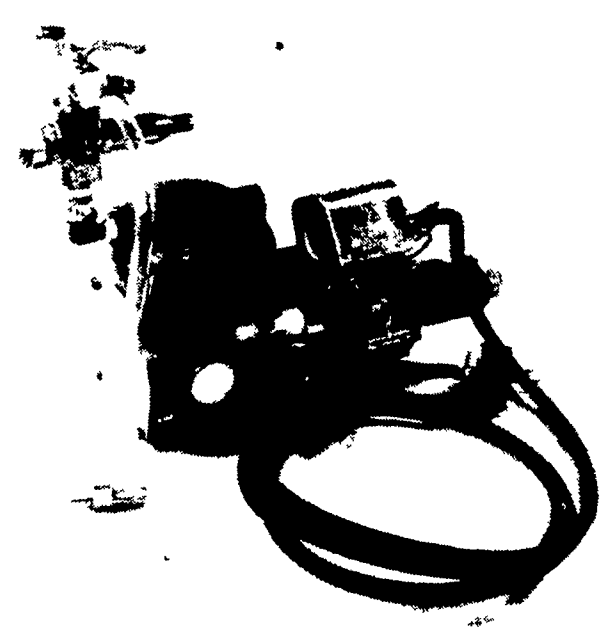
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