

Several plans presented

# Delaware farmers discuss farmland preservation ideas

DOVER, Del. — Each year the U.S. loses about three million acres of farmland—10,000 of them in Delaware. Loss of farmland may threaten the First State's agricultural economy in the next decade or two.

America's farmland, which provides urban open space as well as food and fiber for this nation and much of the world, is actually owned by thousands of individuals with private property rights. Each year many of them make personal economic decisions to sell land to developers or to take marginal land out of production.

These private decisions have far-reaching consequences.

Many forward-thinking communities and states have come to realize that farmland is more than just private property to be used as the owner sees fit; it is

also a vital, irreplaceable natural resource that is fast dwindling.

These governmental bodies are searching for ways to encourage farmers to keep land in farming while compensating them for the loss of their right to convert land to other, often more profitable, uses.

Delawareans addressed the issue of preserving an adequate supply of farmland at a two-day seminar held recently at the Capital Grange in Dover, sponsored by the Delaware Extension Service. Speakers from several nearby states discussed their communities' on-going approaches to farmland preservation.

Though each locality tailors its farmland preservation plan to its unique situation, certain common themes emerge.

The opportunity to sell

farmland for nonfarm uses at high prices encourages many farmers to do so, says Gerald F. Vaughn, coordinator, community and resource development, Delaware Extension Service.

This not only takes farmland out of production, but also makes it expensive for farmers to buy land needed for expansion to efficient farm size in today's agriculture. Several approaches to farmland preservation bring land values back within the reach of the farmer.

Perhaps a tract of land close to a city is worth \$1000 per acre to the farmer in its crop-producing potential. The farmer wants to continue farming as long as he is physically and economically able, although he has been offered \$20,000 per acre for the land by a shopping center developer.

If we are asking that farmer to keep his land in farming for the public good, we must be willing to compensate him for those missed profits.

In Suffolk County on Long Island, the top agricultural county in New York State, suburbanization has taken over much of the farmland since World War II. In order to maintain a viable agricultural economy in the still rural western end of the county, the county legislature voted to purchase development rights from the rural landowners.

Under this optional arrangement, a landowner who decides to sell development rights to the county may continue farming the land, may let the land lie fallow, or may sell

the land for agricultural purposes.

All the landowner gives up is the right to use or sell the land for non-agricultural purposes.

The county, having paid for the land's development rights with public funds, will hold the development rights in perpetuity. That is, the county has paid for development rights it doesn't plan to use, in order to keep the land in farming for the public good.

With no development possible, such farmland becomes less expensive for farmers to buy for agricultural purposes. This makes it possible for young farmers to get started, or established farmers to expand operations.

Calvert County, Maryland uses another method of reimbursing a farmer for unused development rights. It is known as the transfer of development rights.

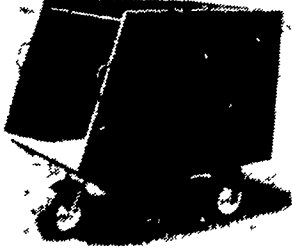
In this tobacco-growing area within commuting distance of Washington, D.C., the development pressures are intense.

The county is zoned for minimum five-acre lots, although parts of the county could easily accommodate more growth. The Calvert County government appointed an Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board to determine which farmland should be preserved, and which other land has the necessary sewers, water and roads to accommodate further growth.

They marked off the two districts on the county map, calling the farmland they wished to preserve the "designated agricultural

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