

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

You can forget any thoughts of an easy solution to farmland preservation problems.

After sitting through a day-long meeting on that subject recently and hearing the comments of perhaps 50 different people, mostly Delaware farmers, I'm convinced of two things: something needs to be done to preserve the state's precious farmland; to get an acceptable policy will be one of the most difficult challenges ever faced by the agricultural community.

A reasonable assemblage of farmers, farm leaders, government workers, and so-called experts, gathered in Dover for an extension sponsored forum on land use planning. Topics ranged from a proposed New Castle County agricultural zone to how land use is viewed in western European countries.

In between, I heard almost every possible alternative, including the do-nothing policy that has been followed in Delaware for so many years.

The environment was friendly with most of the participants calling each other by first names. But you could sense the makings of a fight. Landowners wanted to get the facts and hear the alternatives and broaden their base of understanding. But they also wanted to ask some rather pointed ques-

tions and to defend their homesteads.

As farmers stood up in the forum to express their views, or in private conferences, a feeling of frustration seemed to be all around them. It was like they were there to defend themselves from some unknown governmental unit that might be swooping on them, seizing their right to farm. And yet many of them admitted the need for some kind of planning and logical developmental growth in agricultural areas.

Farmers are stuck with a real dilemma when it comes to land use planning. For many, their farms are their retirement programs, the death benefits for their spouses, and the legacy for their children. They don't want to sign over that right to agricultural zoning.

At the same time, they don't want to be plagued with the problems of rural residents who live on adjoining land and don't like to smell hog manure or the sight of pesticides being applied.

As one observer at the meeting so appropriately stated it, farmers want their cake and then be able to eat it also. And most farmers admit to this.

They want some kind of protection while they're farming, and that includes property tax breaks, right-to-

farm legislation, and other actions that keep them competitive in the farming business.

Then when they or their heirs want to cash in, they'd like to be able to sell to the highest bidder even if that means a rural developer.

But they can't have it both ways. To get the protection they need now, it seems to me they're going to have to give up some future opportunities—whether that means agricultural zoning, selling off development rights, agricultural districts, and the other terminology that professional land use planners toss around.

The governmental observers who attended that meeting must be convinced that farmers don't know what they want, and that's probably right because as a group farmers don't agree on what should be done. They probably never will. That's because farmers are fiercely independent businessmen, with their own individual situations and points of view. What's right for one is totally wrong for another.

The farmer who spoke very eloquently about the need for agricultural zoning lives in New Castle County and has seen firsthand what

can happen when urban development moves into an agricultural area.

He's at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Kent County farmer who talked about voluntary action on the part of farmers, and a viable agricultural economy as the best farmland preservation scheme.

Farmland preservation plans are in place in many states, including Pennsylvania, Maryland and New York. One expert said perhaps 25 states have some kind of farmland preservation laws and almost every state has problems, at least in urbanized areas.

So what will happen in Delaware? What plan will the First State adopt?

I haven't the slightest idea and I don't know any more about what farmers want after attending the meeting than I did before I went. I do know they want to be involved in whatever planning and talking is going on. I know that whatever program is implemented will affect them more than anyone else, will take away something that they now have, and will leave them as individuals on different sides of the issue.

There won't be consensus among farm organizations, farm organization leader-

ship, or individual farmers. The best anyone can hope is some well-discussed planning, a very cautious and open approach to the whole problem, and ultimately some form of majority rule.

Something needs to be done. Almost all farmers agree to that. Who should do it, how it should be accomplished and when it should be accomplished, are

issues that are yet to be decided.

Since it affects them most, it seems to me farmers should seize the initiative and move forward with a program of land use planning and that suits most of them the best. If they wait for some form of government to take on the job, they're apt to wind up with a lot less.

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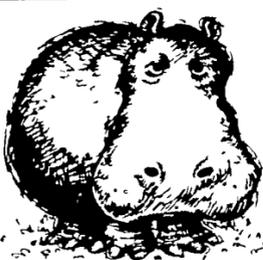
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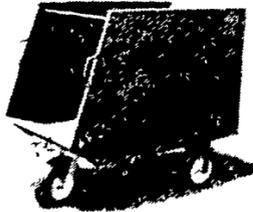
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