

# Lebanon Co. seeks farm land preservation input

**BY SHEILA MILLER**  
**LEBANON** — When a public meeting is scheduled in competition with Friday evening shopping, movies, and going out to dinner, the fact that the auditorium in the Lebanon County Municipal Building was not filled to overflowing is not surprising.  
 But, in a county where agriculture plays an important role, it was surprising when less than 50 people turned out for an open discussion on how to preserve farm land.  
 The meeting, which was

designed to gather public input on how to keep the agricultural land in Lebanon County from being buried under asphalt and shingles, was sponsored by the Lebanon County Farmers Association, the Lebanon County Conservation District, and the Extension Service.  
 County Commissioner Ed Arnold stressed that the purpose of the meeting was to gather the opinions and ideas of farmers on how best to tackle a complex problem. He added the suggestions from groups such as builders

and realtors would also be welcome.  
 But, few of the citizens attending the meeting had many comments.  
 In part, this may be due to the fact the panel of five speakers, in their lengthy discussions, may have answered the questions in their minds.  
 Earl Meyer, the assistant director of the Lebanon County Planning Department, stated the concern for farm land preservation was well founded.  
 He explained the current community plans developed by the County were based on the core-growth principle—that is, they focus on population concentrations.

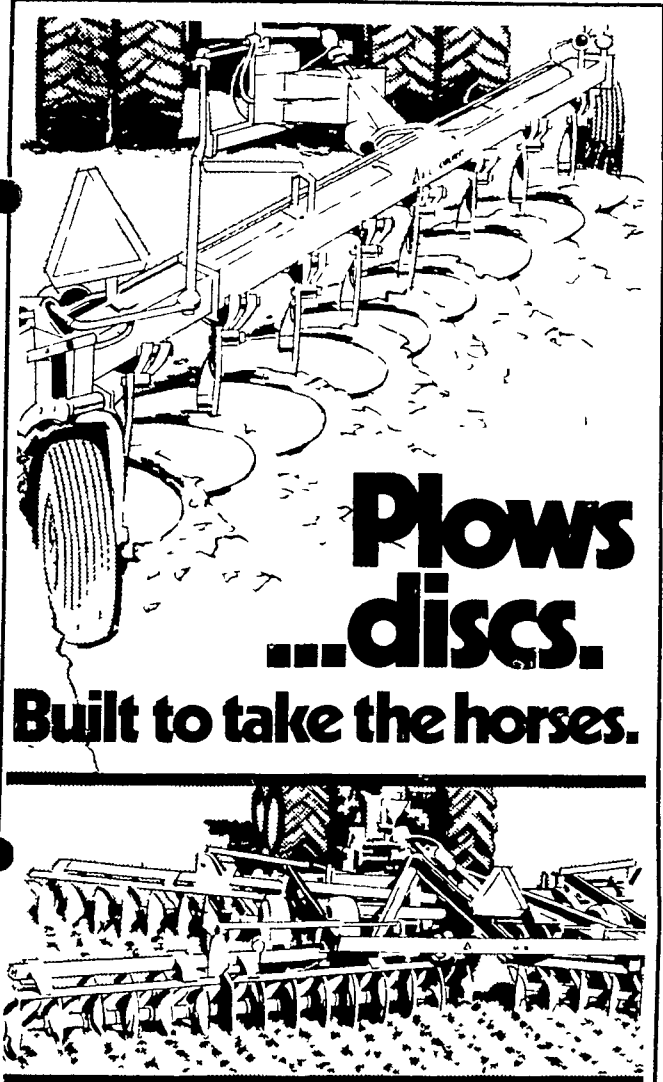
The present-day zoning defines high density residential areas around existing populated areas. These areas are planned for sewerage and water.  
 Outside of the high-density areas are the suburbs, or low-density residential areas. These are defined as areas of expected expansion within the next 20 years.  
 Also around the high population density areas are the commercial and industrial areas, located close to highways, railroads, and existing business areas.  
 Meyer pointed out that everything that doesn't fit into any of these categories is thrown into agricultural zoning, receiving the last and least attention.  
 He added the planning commission is looking at six alternative methods for helping to preserve Lebanon County's farmland.

First, he said, is differential assessment, where the land would be taxed based on its current use rather than its market value.  
 Secondly, the purchase and lease back alternative would allow the government to buy the farm from the land owner, and then turn around and lease it back to the farmer.  
 Meyer discussed the next two alternatives as being similar. The purchase of development rights would allow the farmer to maintain the ownership of the land, but would restrict the land use for future sales. In this case, the purchase would be made by a unit of government, either local, county, or state.  
 Transferring development rights, Meyer explained, would allow a developer to buy the development rights from a farmer in an agricultural zone and transfer the right to a higher density area. The purchase would be a floating market, Meyer added.  
 The last two alternatives Meyer mentioned were agricultural districts and agricultural zoning. The difference between the two, he said, are one's voluntary and the other is mandatory.  
 Ag districts provide a tax incentive to the land owner to keep the farm for agriculture. Farmers in a particular area could band together to protect their farming rights, he said.  
 Ag zoning helps to preserve farm land, Meyer noted, by requiring large lot zoning in agricultural areas.

"Where the minimum lot size is 2 to 5 acres, people are financially discouraged from developing the most productive soil."  
 Meyer added the planning commission will be reviewing these alternatives over the next 6 months. This period of time, he stated, is the information gathering time which he said he feels is important.  
 Chris Allen, legislative analyst for the Pennsylvania Farmers Association, told the group the 1975 policy on land use adopted by the PFA members called for voluntary farm land preservation where farmers would get compensation through the purchase of development rights.  
 "We want to preserve farmland not just prime soils if they're not being used in productive farming," Allen concluded.  
 Dave Schreffler, of the Millcreek Township Planning Commission, gave the group a local example of farmland preservation that's working.  
 He explained that the township realized their agricultural resources were valuable and needed to be preserved.  
 Based on the farm's soil types, present land use, closeness to other farms, size of the farm, and the direction of development pressures in the area, the township developed agricultural districts.  
 Schreffler noted the size of the farm is looked at for the purpose of determining whether it would be an

economically feasible farm. Local farmers established a minimum size of 50 acres, in contrast to the state's minimum of 116 acres.  
 The township developed an agricultural advisory board made up of three farmers, and a representative from either the Soil and Water Conservation District or the Extension agent, along with one supervisor and one member of the planning and zoning board for the township.  
 The Agricultural Industry District in Millcreek Township is defined as being "comprised primarily of existing agricultural areas of the township and those areas where environmental conditions are most conducive to agricultural pursuits."  
 "Agriculture shall be viewed as a specialized form of industry with unique needs such as large land area. It is a land use characterized by the production through biological and botanical processes of saleable commodities as a result of the conjunction of raw materials (soils, seeds, plants, water, fertilizer), manpower (labor and machinery), and energy (solar and other) to produce marketable products the sale of which supports diversified local economy of the Township."  
 "It is the purpose of this district to protect and stabilize this economic activity by preserving prime

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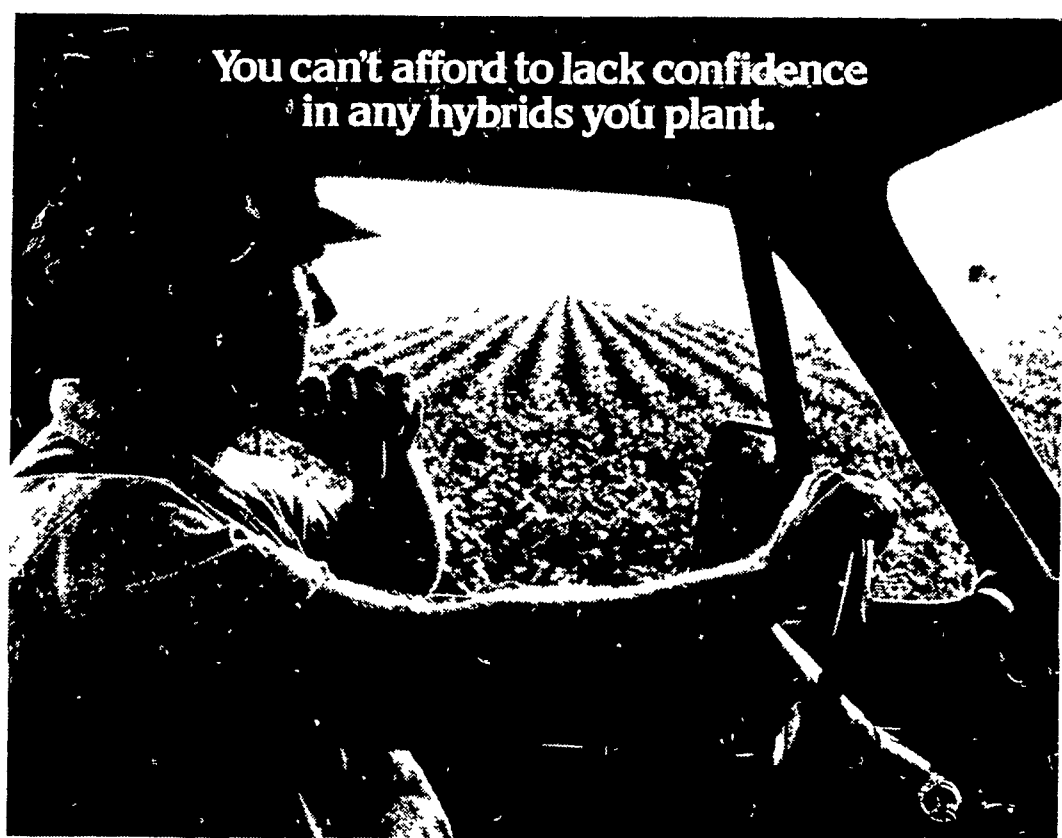
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