

Farmland preservation discussed in Lower Mt. Bethel Twp.

BY VIVIAN PAUL
Staff Correspondent
EASTON — Trying to avoid suburban sprawl, planners and residents of Lower Mt. Bethel Township met recently to discuss possible legislation to preserve farmland. The township is located in the northeast corner of Northampton County, just north of Easton.

The discussion centered on House Bill 1793 and 1914 and how they might be adapted locally to encourage open space. Rep. Leonard Q. Gruppo, of the 137th district, a sponsor of 1914, and Roslyn Kahler of the county Soil Conservation District, explained the bills and answered questions.

Planning commission member Winfield Keck expressed the concern that the piecemeal development be avoided. He said that when small subdivisions are proposed, although he might be opposed to them, if they meet current zoning regulations, he must approve them.

Township residents also expressed concern that 13% of the township is owned by public utilities and within the past several years, a utility explored the possibility of acquiring enough property to put the figure at 25 percent.

Gruppo said he supported

legislation to preserve farmland, but that he believed the power should be based locally. He assured the group that Northampton County council has expressed support for HB 1793.

Kahler warned the planning commission not to consider zoning land for farmland. He explained that farmers lose their equity and consequently their borrowing power.

Such a proposal was recently abandoned in another Northampton County community. In May, Moore Township planning commission proposed what became known as the 50-50 plan, as part of their new comprehensive plan. With it, development would have been permitted on only one-half of any tract sold.

Planners argued that it was the best way to preserve

open space in what is the fastest growing township in the county.

There are less than a dozen full time farmers in the township and they flatly rejected the proposal.

They pointed out that if the development potential of their properties were cut in half, the equity would be cut in half, and therefore the ability to borrow would be limited.

"If he can't borrow, you are forcing him to slowly cut his throat," one farmer said.

The farmers urged planners consider approving construction on land not suitable for farming or limit the number of building permits issued.

When Moore supervisors voted on the new township comprehensive plan, they approved it, but-deleted the 50-50 plan.

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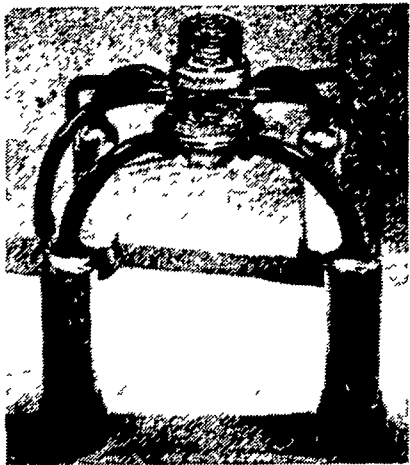
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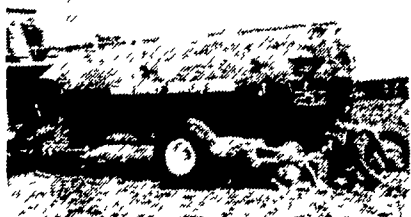
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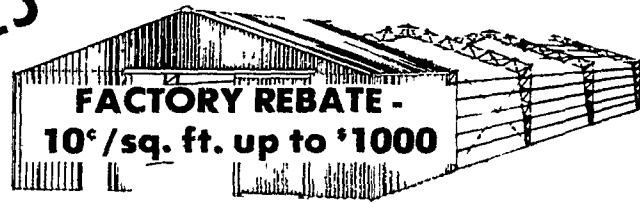
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