

Farmland preservation sparks ag business seminar

By Joyce Bupp
Staff Correspondent

YORK — In the last ten years, York County has lost 820 farms, a decline of 25 percent. At the same time, the 60,000 farms across Pennsylvania diminished by 12,000.

Still, food supplies have remained constant, Cumberland County Commissioner Rosemarie C. Peiffer told an audience of more than one hundred attending the

annual York Agri-Business seminar, hosted Jan. 20 at Avalong Farms restaurant by the York Chamber of Commerce and the Extension service. Theme for the day-long session was agricultural land preservation.

An "ex-farm girl," Commissioner Peiffer related why elected officials must be concerned with the continuing loss of farmland.

"Current farmland preservation



Setting ag land aside in an "industrial district", with appropriate zoning, is the preservation technique adopted by Millcreek Township in Lebanon County. David Schreffler, a member of Millcreek's planning and zoning board, outlined that municipality's unusual approach to saving prime farm ground.

Are ag areas for you?

YORK — Interested in preserving your back forty from the encroachments of housing developers and the ensuing noise-pollution-odor neighborhood problems that could follow?

Consider establishing a voluntary "Ag Area," suggests Richard Fox, Capital region Extension agent for community development. Fox outlined the legislation and procedural steps during York's Agri-Business seminar.

Act 43, the Agricultural Area Security Law, provides the enabling legislation allowing farmowners to voluntarily establish Ag Areas, if approved, within their municipality.

Benefits of ag area enrollment include a limit on local regulations, lowered chances of land-taking by eminent domain, and possible modifications of certain rules by state agencies. Optional development-right purchases could possibly be offered for acreages included in ag areas in the future, if such a program was established and funded.

Landowners representing the minimum 500 acre-size must voluntarily make the ag area proposal to their local governing municipality, using proposal forms available from the state Department of Agriculture.

Land to be considered for enrollment must be used for the production of crops, livestock or livestock products. The total 500 or more acres do not have to be adjacent, and could likely even cross municipal boundaries, if all local governments involved granted approval.

A published notice of the proposal allows 30 days for public comment on the ag area application, during which time other landowners may request inclusion in the set-aside area.

Local municipalities then have 45 days in which to review the voluntary proposal, which must be studied by both the planning and zoning board, and an ag area advisory committee drawn from municipal residents. Included on that committee are to be three farmers, one interested citizen and one local official.

Taken into consideration during review of the proposal are such factors as types of soil, climate, topography, farm improvements within the area and predicted trends in agriculture. Visuals available for additional information are Soil Conservation Service soil maps, ag census statistics, and land use surveys.

A public hearing follows the review, to allow additional public comment on the proposal. Within 180 days from the initial application for an ag area, action must be taken by the municipality to either grant or deny the farmland preserve.

Appeals on the final decision must be made to the county's common pleas court within 30 days of the municipality's action.

For additional information, or for copies to the ag area proposal form, contact the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Office of Planning & Research, 2301 North Cameron Street, Harrisburg, PA 17110. — J.B.



A York Agri-Business seminar panel of farmland preservationists puzzled over a recent report by the president's commission on housing that suggested saving farmland could create future housing shortages. Clockwise from bottom left are Amos Funk, Bill Conn, Leon Lankford and Gilbert Malone.

legislation still hasn't changed or halted the loss of farmland," she warned. With land development slowed by economic conditions, and farm incomes remaining stagnant, Peiffer suggested that this is a critical period for taking action to preserve remaining prime farm ground.

A panel representing various interests in ag land preservation shared views and experience, and speculated on the future of preserving productive farm ground. Panelists were Amos Funk, farmer and chairman of Lancaster County's Agricultural Preservation Committee; attorney Gilbert Malone; Dover Township manager Leon Lankford; and William Conn, chief of land use and development controls for the York County Planning Commission.

Funk, a recognized leader in agriculture land preservation, admitted that his ideas have changed with his involvement over the past 13 years. Today, said Funk, his earlier goals to have ag land saved through agricultural districts, and then later through the purchase of development rights, no longer seem viable.

"I just don't think it's possible to save great amounts of land by the purchase of development rights," claimed the Lancaster vegetable producer and retail marketer.

Funk's altered opinions on development-right purchases is due to the huge volumes of money needed to buy up such rights on any great quantity of land.

Neighboring Maryland is the only state committed to large-scale development-right purchases. And, at the current rate of their funding, paying \$1,000 per acre for those rights, Funk said it would take 200 years to buy up the estimated 1.5 million acres of prime Maryland farmland, or a century if the purchase rate could somehow be doubled.

Instead, he said he now leans more toward the "Millcreek Township" concept, taken by that rural Lebanon County municipality, where agriculture is treated as an industry and productive grounds set aside in an industrial district.

Attorney Gilbert Malone has worked for many years with developing farmland preservation regulations in several southern York County townships. He expressed his chief concern, not solely for preserving productive soils, but for preserving it in viable-sized tracts.

He cited what he sees as three

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Cumberland County commissioner Rosemarie C. Peiffer told York Agri-Business seminar participants that state legislation has had little effect toward changing or halting the loss of prime farmland.



A featured York Agri-Business seminar speaker was Dr. Samuel Smith, dean of Penn State's college of agriculture. Dr. Smith was welcomed to the annual confab by co-chairman Bill Fléet.