

Farm Preservation Bond Referendum On November Ballot

WILKES-BARRE — Pennsylvania residents can vote on a bond issue affecting farmland preservation, November 3rd. This is the only statewide referendum on the election ballot.

The question on the ballot is whether or not the state should establish a \$100 million bond issue "for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements for the preservation of farmland." Agricultural conservation easements are more commonly known as development rights. The bond referendum would provide a source of funds to start the program.

"The issues involved in farmland preservation are extremely complex," says Stanford Lembeck, Penn State Community Planning Specialist. "If the referendum is passed, the bond issue will provide funding through which the state can preserve farmland for a period of 25 years or in perpetuity," he explains.

"County committees would set

up local priorities that conform with state guidelines to purchase easement rights within the framework of state law," says Lembeck. Counties would also contribute to the cost of locally approved programs.

The enabling legislation will probably be an amendment to the Agricultural Security Act (Act 43) of 1981. Act 43 allows local governments — in reality mostly townships — to create areas where farming is the preferred activity. Pending legislation would amend Act 43 to set up a method for the state to purchase development rights.

The farmland preservation program is entirely voluntary. There would be no effort to force farmers to sell their development rights. If those rights are purchased, the owner could continue to farm, but the deed restriction would not permit other uses.

For a 25 year easement, counties are limited to paying the landowner one-tenth of the full value of

the development rights. That value is determined by subtracting the appraised agricultural value from the appraised market value of the property. "That means," says Lembeck, "that a farm with development rights worth \$50,000 could be preserved for 25 years by a payment of \$5,000, or it could be preserved as farmland forever by a payment of \$50,000."

Lembeck stresses that the referendum is only part of a larger program aimed at preserving Pennsylvania's Farmland. "The process of establishing guidelines and an individual farmer's decision to

enter the program would be lengthy," he says. "A farmer would have to compare current and potential income, expenses and taxes — all in light of a long-term financial plan. The decision would have to be based on a very careful consideration of personal and family goals."

Farmers who qualify and elect to enter the program would be compensated for keeping their land in farm use. The pressures of development would be eased, local farming would remain and those farmers will be assessed taxes on a lower base. This would also pre-

serve precious open space and the beauty of farmland.

However, local officials will have to determine the tax impact of less development in their boundaries. The purchase of development rights will be costly and include complex procedures.

Pro or con, Pennsylvania Voters will have the chance to decide on November 3rd if they want to establish the mechanism to fund farmland preservation. Lembeck encourages voters to attend local issues forums and public discussions on the referendum and on farmland preservation.

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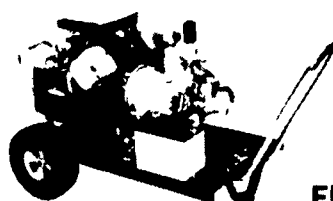
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