

Seeking To Maintain Lancaster County's Diversity

BY LISA RISSER

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— Like many newcomers to the area, Dr. Tom Daniels likes what he sees. He enjoys the diversity of Lancaster County with its rural and urban mixture.

Daniels is in a position to be able to help retain the county's uniqueness as director of the Agricultural Preserve Board.

"I think farmland preservation becomes important to maintaining diversity," he stated. "My goal is to maintain diversity, and one way I hope to do so is by building a consensus in the farm community on farmland preservation."

Daniels comes to his new post, which he began three weeks ago, armed with knowledge on regional and community planning, a subject that he taught as an associate professor at Kansas State University. Before that he taught at Iowa State University. His special emphasis was in rural and small town planning.

"One of the most difficult things I think farmers face is that it takes a long-term commitment of time and money to farm, and if they see development coming their way, they're not sure what to do," said Daniels.

In his role, which Daniels considers primarily advisory, this Vermont native hopes to provide farmers with information so that they can make decisions. One option he will strongly suggest is that farmers form ag security areas.

"I'm going to be doing outreach programs to interest farmers in ag security areas on easement sales

and to talk to farmers about starting ag security areas," Daniels explained. "Forming these areas is a local decision, however, and I want to provide information so they can make informed decisions."

"The more I am able to speak with members of the farming community and show them that their decision isn't just development versus farming that there is a middle ground, the better I'll be able to help maintain the county's diversity."

According to Daniels there are three benefits to being in an ag security area: farms within ag security areas will be less likely to have to worry about nuisance laws, will have somewhat greater protection against condemnation, and will be able to sell easements.

So far approximately 278,000 out of 600,000 Lancaster County acres have been planned for ag use. Currently about 400,000 acres are in actual farm use. Many of these acres are being eyed by developers.

"If you're going to develop, I think it's wise to do it in a slow and careful way," stated Daniels. "Those communities that have just sprawled have high public service costs such as schools and roads. Careful planning can control those costs, and the Ag Preservation Board can influence where development goes. I want to push for in-fill development, which I feel is a much more cost-effective form of development."

In-fill development would require developers to build on land that has been skipped over in pre-

vious projects. For instance, in some cases a residential home builder may go a mile or more beyond present development to construct houses "out in the country." It is these parcels of land in between that Daniels would like to see developed first.

Daniels and the Ag Preservation Board are interested in preserving as much of the 278,000 acres in Lancaster County as is possible. They expect to receive about \$2 million in state funds with additional monies coming from county coffers. Daniels estimates that the group should be able to buy easements from about seven farms per year.

In order to receive state funding, Lancaster County is revising its guidelines to more closely match state requirements. The key to their updated guidelines will be a slightly different system for ranking farms that want to sell easements. Daniels has proposed that 55 percent of the decision be based on the likelihood of the farm's being developed, followed by quality of the farmland (30 percent) and historic, scenic, and environmental qualities, cost, stewardship, and number of times the application is made (15 percent).

Daniels also is making recommendations that, as a general rule, not more than 15 percent of the total monies be spent on one easement and that perhaps there should be requirements that the farm employ conservation and nutrient management practices.

Twenty-three farms have applied for easements already and

have been ranked according to the county's present set of guidelines. "Before we purchase easements, we have to have our new guidelines and ranking system and re-rank the farms," said Daniels. "But I don't expect that the new ranking will change the top 10 farms."

The Ag Preservation Board is hoping to purchase easements on 15 farms this year, or a total of about 1,400 to 1,500 acres. Most of

this acreage is in the area of West and East Donegal and Mount Joy where there are strong development interests.

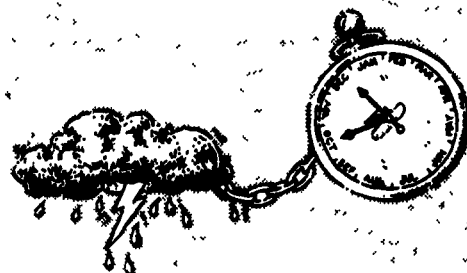
"Lancaster County is an extremely desirable place to live," commented Daniels. "One of the key ingredients that makes it desirable is the strength of its farming community. We have to remember that you don't have farmland without people farming the land."



Dr. Tom Daniels is the new director of the Agricultural Preservation Board. The map beside him will become very familiar to him as he works to maintain the diversity of lifestyles in Lancaster County.

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