

Vanishing Acres: Despite Development Pressure, Farmers Find Ways To Thrive

Part 2 of 3

Editor's Note: In part one of the Vanishing Acres series, farmers spoke about their experiences when dealing with residential neighbors. In part two, farmers learn to deal with — and profit — from the challenges.

It has become increasingly difficult for agriculture to remain a way of life in communities such as Lancaster County. Due to rapid growth, many organizations talk of preserving farmland as part of our landscape without thought to preserving the economic viability of farmers.

— Jeff Stoltzfus
Adult Farmer Instructor
Eastern Lancaster County

Ressler admits that choosing to develop land is 'more profitable than the difficult, uphill production battle that keeps the land in production.'

Sprawling residential development that destroys farmland imposes a net financial loss on the coffers of local communities, inhibiting their ability to, among other things, fund quality school systems, according to a new analysis of three Minnesota towns recently released by the Land Stewardship Project and the American Farmland Trust. . . . Farmland protection may be financially beneficial not only because of its contribution to the tax base, but also because it holds down property tax valuation.

— Excerpt From
"Farmland And The
Tax Bill: The Cost
Of Community Services
In Three
Minnesota Cities"
The Land Stewardship Project
St. Croix, Minn.

In a 13-year span, between 1982 and 1995, about 30,000 acres have been lost in Lancaster County. Farmland is being lost at a rate of 2,000 acres per year.

ANDY ANDREWS
Lancaster Farming Staff
LANSDALE (Montgomery Co.) — Like the saying, Fred Seipt knows how to turn a lemon into lemonade.

Seven years ago, feeling the incessant pressure of development take away land he used to rent, and trying to figure out how to compete against the giant Philadelphia milk processors, Fred decided to open up an ice cream parlor.

The Towamencin Township dairy farmer saw how successful it was with the crowds. Even while losing farmland rapidly, Seipt saw how many people enjoyed ice cream.

Two years later, at the suggestion of his son, Matthew, Seipt spent \$1.2 million to construct two miniature golf courses, a batting cage, and a driving range to round out the dream of an "entertainment farm."

The "lemonade strategy"

worked. Now, business at Freddy-Hill Farms is booming, with no end in sight.

Before Jacob and Joe Stahl built a poultry layer operation in Lititz in 1979, as part of the arrangement, the farmers were required to grow a cash crop. Instead of tobacco, Jacob Stahl decided to grow tomatoes — 10 acres of them — in addition to a large variety of vegetable crops.

The market is there. Instead, of where there appeared nothing but constant development pressure and nearly mindless urban sprawl, with help from son Joe, Stahl is able to market vegetable crops to hundreds of neighbors. Regularly, those driving to and from work are customers of the small truck farm, which also houses about 60,000 layers.

Also, the Stahls are paid to do custom mowing work in fields owned by the housing developers.

Tim Fritz, who farms part-time with his father Harold and brother Jack near Bridgeport, east of Lancaster,



John Valkovec, Klecknersville, right, farms more than 500 acres, including a great deal of rented land in various locations. In the late 1980s, Valkovec saw farmland being lost to development at a rapid rate. "We saw that they were selling everything around us," he said. "We got scared." At left is Tom Morgart, technician, Lehigh Valley Crop Management Association.



Tim Fritz, who farms part-time with his father Harold and brother Jack near Bridgeport, east of Lancaster, has learned to make the best of steadily encroaching development. Houses are close to his farm.

caster, has learned to make the best of steadily encroaching development. Some land was sold to the East Lampeter Township to be used as a park. In essence, at least that part of the farm is "preserved" and will remain green.

The rest has been converted to a productive grazing system. Fritz

'We saw that they were selling everything around us,' he said. 'We got scared.'

said the grazing system is not only good for the cows and farm profitability, but also good for community relations.

"Our location in an urbanizing area has a lot of influence of what's possible," said Leon Ressler, Lancaster County's ag environment agent who deals with farm/urban interface issues. Ressler admits that choosing to develop land is "more profitable than the difficult, uphill production battle that keeps the land in production.

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According to Tom Daniels, director of the county's ag preservation board, in 1982, the county's farmland numbered 417,000 acres. In 1995, about 388,000 acres are devoted to farmland.

Farmland is being lost at a rate of 2,000 acres per year. In 38 of 41 townships, there are about 310,000 acres in ag zoning. Strasburg township will be adopting ag zoning this year, according to Daniels.

'What do you do?' said Anita. 'I mean, I hate the developers, I hate what they're doing. . . .'

"People don't really understand that," said Ressler. "They see open space with a romantic feeling. They don't have a real concept about the level of activity necessary to maintain the economic structure to maintain that open space."

Rapidly, the county (which accounts for 25 percent of the state's total agricultural production) is losing farmland to development. In a 13-year span, between 1982 and 1995, about 30,000 acres

Selling the property to development can be a heartbreaking decision. For many farmers, that simply isn't the option, despite enormous market losses.

For the Stahls in Lititz, they admit to feeling the pressures as more layer contracts are dropped. "The egg business is such that they don't need any more houses," said Jacob. "The unfortunate thing is that they don't need any more eggs."

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"The whole time emphasis has changed," said Fred Seipt. In the past, farmers worried about timeliness, management, and many other business considerations. Production and profitability were forefront. But development pressures have given farmers additional worries.