

Reassessment Has Somerset Farmers Looking At Options

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MEYERSDALE (Somerset Co.) — The second of five informational meetings covering the topic of Farmland Reassessment in Somerset County found about 60 persons converging into the forum room of the Meyersdale elementary school, eager for any good news that can help them cut their real estate taxes.

Shortly after the beginning of the new year, property owners in the county will be notified of their real property assessments, a process which began in 1995. The last one was done in 1974.

"There is a lot of misunderstanding and this series of meetings is something we are having around the county, so that next spring you can make some informed decisions," said Bob Brown, director of the county extension service in Somerset.

"Clean and Green and Farmland Preservation are not the same thing," he stated. "With Clean and Green you keep complete control over your land."

The landowners, however, by meeting's end seemed still uncertain that Clean and Green — Act 319 — The Pennsylvania Farmland and Assessment Act of 1974 — would achieve the right end if they applied and were found eligible.

Talking among themselves several said outright that they will probably just pay the higher taxes and be done with it.

What the landowners viewed as a sticking point in the Act's three "Use-value Assessment" categories was the criteria listed in that of "Agricultural Reserve."

Sandwiched between Agricultural Use and Forest Reserve, the

landowners found much to ponder in Agricultural Reserve five main points, especially the last three.

Agricultural reserve (land that is capable of, but not currently being farmed), cannot be less than 10 contiguous acres in area; it must be noncommercial; it must be open to the public and used for outdoor recreation or for enjoyment of scenic or natural beauty; no charge or fee for using the land; no discrimination against persons using the land.

"In agricultural reserve," said John Riley, the Somerset County chief assessor, "you can't post the land, you must keep it open to public use.

Riley said that somebody at the previous meeting that some 90 persons attended at the courthouse in Somerset, raised the liability issue if a landowner has land in ag-reserve and must allow the public to use it.

Riley said the farmer should be protected unless he has been negligent in some way. He did imply, however, that there's no guarantee against a shrewd attorney hired by a person who is involved in an incident while on that particular piece of acreage.

Clean and Green's positive benefits impressed dairyman Bill Yoder from Meyersdale RD who puts his dairy animals through a rotational and intensive grazing setup.

"I'll probably apply if it can save on my taxes," he said, reflecting on the statements made by Brown and Riley. "I want to make sure my land is fairly assessed," he added.

"This is what's important about Clean and Green, you can save money on taxes," said Riley adding that getting the word out to



Bob Brown (center), director of the county extension in Somerset, answers individual questions regarding Clean and Green (Act 319).

landowners of 10 or more acres that are devoted to agriculture, is necessary.

June 1, 1997 is the deadline for the applications to be in. But applicants were and are urged to turn in their completed forms now without the final signature, to expedite the process before the final date.

"The new assessed values are absolutely going to be higher than the current assessed values," Riley predicted.

To illustrate how assessed value and fair market value are evaluated, Riley used an overhead projector to show a breakdown of two anonymous farms that recently, were sold in separate Somerset

County municipalities.

He said that some properties are assessed too high and others, too low, as the numbers from the two farms illustrated.

"The whole purpose of re-evaluation," he said, "is to get everyone in the middle."

Following the presentation, officials went amongst the group to answer individual questions, an approach unlike that in Somerset

where efforts to answer questions from the front of the room were not as satisfactory.

Assisting Brown and Riley were Joe Hudack from the county assessment office. He was in charge of the Clean and Green applications. Alan Miller, assistant chief assessor, and from appraiser Cole-Layer Trumble, David Depp project manager and Stan Sitko.



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