

Suburban Sprawl Could Mean Bad Tidings For Farmland, Inner City

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Suburban sprawl can have substantial impact on the land surrounding a city. And in states like Ohio, with 16 urban centers, urban expansion can quickly take its toll on masses of prime farmland.

In the past 40 years, 11 counties surrounding Youngstown, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus and Akron have lost more than half of the farmland because of urban influences.

"What happens in the suburbs and inner cities affect what happens to farmland just as much as what happens in rural areas," said Tim Lawrence, Ohio State University Extension Community Development agent for the Darby Watershed project.

Farmland preservation and development aren't mutually exclusive, Lawrence said. He is one of the organizers of the upcoming conference, Growth & the Future, A Land Use Conference for All of Ohio.

Cities are becoming vacant as farmland is converted to housing developments. Even with only a moderate rise in populations, people have greatly expanded the

actual area they use to live, Lawrence said. People need to find win/win solutions that allow for development without losing the best agricultural soils.

A look at Ohio land use trends sheds light on the extent of the situation. Allen Prindle, an associate professor of economics at Otterbein University in Westerville, compiled trends data for the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force, which was organized by Governor George Voinovich.

Here are some of Prindle's findings:

- Ohio's population equaled 11.2 million in 1995. That will increase 5.4 percent by 2015.

- For every 1 percent increase in population, urban land use increased 4.7 percent from 1960 to 1990.

- During 1982-1992, land used for farming decreased 120,000 acres a year, or 7.5 percent.

- The highest population growth in counties surrounding metro areas, while population is on a decline or slow growth in the center cities.

"This kind of rapid growth creates problems," Prindle said.

"Low density suburban developments have their own problems. People have to build new infrastructures and schools and provide community needs and services. Meanwhile, you can't neglect the rural and urban areas that are being abandoned, either."

Plus, for every one acre of prime farmland that converts to suburban or residential use, that acre is not being used for food production, Prindle said. The community loses income from that, even though people tend to believe that the new commercial venture is replacing nothing. Farmland is not being valued.

"From a global perspective, there's a limited amount of land on Earth," Prindle said. "From a state's perspective, there is a perception that there's land in Iowa, so it doesn't matter if there's a loss of Ohio farmland." More than 50 percent of Ohio's land is prime farmland. Many of those acres are also in areas subject to the urban impact.

One reason for the expansion is that townships have control of land use decisions, said Jeff Winegard, general counsel for the

American Farmland Trust.

Although this arrangement provides a lot of local control on how land is developed, it can be detrimental for protecting farmland, Winegard said. If adjoining townships' development plans are at odds with one another, it doesn't make for rational land use decisions.

Winegard has been involved with land use planning in Michigan, including a task force organized by the state. Several of the recommendations that resulted from the Michigan task force could apply to Ohio, he said, including increasing farm profitability, developing urban areas, improving zoning laws and purchasing development rights.

Both Prindle and Winegard will be discussing farm land trends and preservation at the land use conference, which takes place March 25-26 in Columbus. Other topics

on the agenda include: Housing and Transportation, Farmland Preservation, Greenways, Urban Sprawl, Agricultural Zoning, Protecting Rural Character, Ohio Planning and Zoning Enabling Legislation, Urban Communities and Watershed Planning.

The meeting will be held at the Columbus Athenaeum, a historical building that was slated for demolition in 1995 but was saved by an investor concerned about urban preservation.

Registration, which includes meals and handout materials, is \$75. Student registration is \$30. To register, send a check payable to Ohio State University Extension to OSU Extension, Community Development, Suite 235, 700 Ackerman Road, Columbus, Ohio 43202. For more information, contact Lawrence at (937) 644-3162 or Michele Morrone at the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency at (614) 644-2873.

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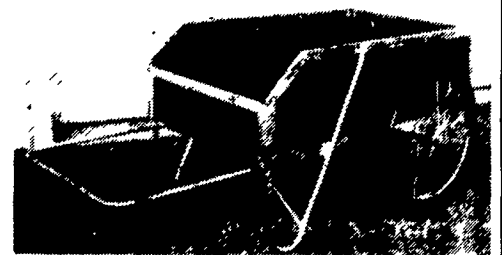


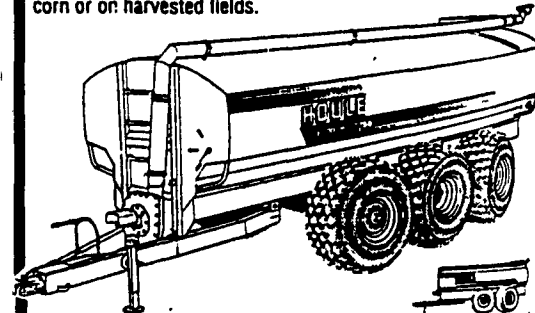
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