

Lebanon Earth Day Event Focuses On Achievements, Goals

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LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) — The non-farming public desires to live in an environment that offers visual open spaces and a sense of natural, everyday healthiness and safety, according to sentiments expressed during an Earth Day event Tuesday night at the Lebanon Campus of the Harrisburg Area Community Campus.

And they want to be able to afford it.

Lebanon County once offered that in big doses.

There's some left, but other than what little is being preserved through the county farmland protection program is being sold to the highest bidder and usually that's one of several regular developer/speculators who closely track land availability and the potential for subdivision and profit.

And while the county was recently featured in a Harrisburg newspaper because of the negative effects of the widespread residential and retail development to the county's aesthetics, economics, traffic system, public services, and recreational opportunities, the tenor of the presentations from six speakers representing various environmental concerns was positive.

April 22 was officially Earth Day, an observation that started 27 years ago to stimulate the general public into an awareness of their surroundings, and how their day-to-day activities affect it and are affected by it.

The program in Lebanon was the first effort by a coalition comprised of the Lebanon County Conservation District, the Lebanon County Groundwater Education Team, the Lebanon Campus of the HACC, and the Quittapahilla Audubon Society.

The event — "Earth Day Report to the Community" — was offered in the form of a progress report on environmental issues and programs affecting Lebanon County.

Admission was free and the three-hour event attracted an audience of about 50 people, with some people arriving and leaving throughout the evening.

While the event was not designed to target the agricultural community, the topics are of concern to those in agriculture. It was also of interest for farmers and land owners because of the outside

perspectives of agriculture presented.

A number of booths were set around the perimeter inside a large gymnasium-sized auditorium, while others were set up in the downtown college campus lobby.

Six speakers discussed various areas of environmental concern in the county and their understanding of problems and how they have or haven't been handled.

The speakers included William Kurtz, director of the Lebanon County Planning Department; County Commissioner Jo Ellen Litz; Jim Thome, of the Philadelphia regional office of the national Nature Conservancy; Charles Wertz, director of the Lebanon Conservation District; Lawrence Taylor, engineer with the Greater Lebanon Refuse Authority; and state Sen. David Brightbill, former chairman of the Senate Environmental and Energy Committee and prime sponsor of key legislation that permits the reuse of historically contaminated industrial sites by removing cleanup liability hurdles.

County Background

Lebanon County arguably was, up until recently, an idealic pastoral county with most residential development near the the industries that offered jobs, and those industries generally developed, or developed along, transportation routes.

The county is a limestone valley community with a mountain ridge at its north and another running parallel along the south.

Commerce and industry and the residential development of workers and business owners developed along an east-west line, generally following major waterways.

The farmland developed along east-west strips also, between the mountain ridges and the center population strip, so that the county resembles a sandwich.

The city of Lebanon had canals, railroads and roadways passing through its heart that connected Harrisburg and the Susquehanna River to shipping points along the East Coast.

A steel industry, spurred by the Cornwall Iron Ore Mine, plus energy from northern coal fields and forests, and lime from limestone mines combined to create a wealthy community that had little need to make any concessions to develop a tourism industry,

although it offered some top-notch outdoor recreation, outside of a couple of streams sacrificed to industrial and municipal waste.

Like many other communities, the Lebanon Valley developed around the workings and business ventures of several wealthy families, and some of those families donated some of their land holdings for public use and that became parks, such as Coleman's Park.

Also, although much of the mountains were public or private property, they were accessible to most of the public for hiking, hunting and fishing.

Then, about 20 years ago, land prices and residential housing demand began to increase.

The mark of the era of the commuter began during the late 50s and early 1960s, though its effects on community lifestyle were slow to bring change.

Up until then, it would have been relatively easy and safe for a person to walk from one end of the county to the other without suffering from threats of arrest for trespassing.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that heavily unionized manufacturing and industrial plants failed to survive competition from non-union workers overseas.

By the late 1970s, and early 1980s, the area's job market crashed and many lost their jobs and started commuting. At the same time, people with jobs in surrounding communities that weren't as rural and safe began seeking housing in the Lebanon area, creating demand for housing.

One of the strategies for redevelopment of the county, especially in the southern end, has been to create a bedroom community for people who can commute to surrounding areas for jobs and then brings the paycheck home to a clean, residential environment.

Development was encouraged by leadership that saw an expanded residential tax base as a means for economic and political strength.

In the meantime, most of the municipalities were faced with the prospect of developing wastewater and water treatment facilities to accommodate new housing, or have development severely limited.

In order to accommodate further development — and also to correct failing onlot systems in older businesses, schools and



State Sen. David "Chip" Brightbill discusses the issues that lead to the development of key legislation of which was author and prime sponsor that allows companies to reuse industrial sites and achieve public environmental health goals.

communities — the leadership in a number of municipalities worked with Lebanon City to expand the city's sewer and water lines out into surrounding areas. Many of those communities then sold off their public lands.

A number of high quality farms had right-of-way strips cut through them, with little recourse, though there were some contentious battles.

Leadership expressed an attitude that the best use of those farms was for residential development, and that the landowners were better off with the public utilities, because now they would get more for their property when they sold it for development.

Even though land grant university research showed that residential development costs more to local government in providing services than is collected in taxes, while agricultural and commercial land provides more in taxes than is spend on services, leaders ignored that research.

Now most of the once-public watershed properties along the southern edge of the county have sold to the private sector and some to the Game Commission.

The county farms were sold for development.

Now, bike riders have limited places to ride without heavy traffic. The Game Commission was forced to close one of its state Game Lands properties due to the overuse of trails by mountain bike groups and horseback riders.

Now, "No Trespassing" signs and attitudes have created a barrier to walking anywhere except along a roadway with heavy traffic.

And now, as groundwater supplies continue to be stressed and the county Planning Department is overwhelmed with request for subdivision plan approvals, now all county commissioners have announced their support of the farmland preservation program.

Up until recently, only one or two commissioners supported the program at any one time.

Those same public officials have suggested that those farms are now the best land for residential development because they have access to public sewer and

water.

The county has Swatara State Park — a 7-mile long park along the northern border that encompasses the banks and some draws along the upper stretch of the Swatara Creek that is still affected by coal mining residues and silt.

Also in the northern end of the county there is Fort Indiantown Gap Military Reservation, which allows controlled public use of its land, a National Cemetery that provides a wildlife refuge, and access to Stony Creek Valley (an unoccupied valley of state Game Lands that stretches 10-miles to Dauphin).

But recreational pressure is hitting all of the county's facilities fairly hard, and there is no incentive for developers to share in the cost of supporting recreational facilities or designing the subdivisions to allow for community recreation.

Speakers

From the county Conservation District's perspective, Wertz said he hoped to convey a message that there is hope for the county, and that some progress is being made in preserving non-renewable resources, such as the county's prime farmland.

He said that future for the county isn't all bleak, but that citizens have to become active in letting their political leaders understand that they want them to support the farmland preservation program.

Wertz told the group that the goal of the district is to help people work and live in the harmonious use of natural resources.

Though not part of his presentation Tuesday, the Lebanon District has been involved in a variety of projects over the years toward that end, especially such pilot and demonstration projects as spray irrigation of liquid hog manure on forestland to use the nutrients in a beneficial manner and reduce the cost of manure management for farmers.

The District has also been heavily involved with Chesapeake Bay Program cost-sharing projects, streambank fencing, community education programs such as sup-



Charles Wertz, director of the Lebanon County Conservation District, stands in front of the District's booth wearing a shirt with a 1994 national award winning Earth Day poster drawn by a local student, and talks with a reporter from a local newspaper about the Earth Day Event.