

Rural, Urban Land Use Becoming Big Issue

COLUMBUS, Ohio — More and more legislation is being introduced in Ohio as the result of increasing challenges between farmers and non-farmers.

Urbanites who move out to the country are often seeking more space, a new home, a view and a "simpler" life. Meanwhile, affected farmers either want to continue farming without competing with homeowners for farmland, or, at the other extreme, hope the urban sprawl skyrockets their land values so they can sell.

In many ways, farmland preservation has become an issue because the people and communities have decided to make it an issue, said Larry Libby, an agricultural economist who specializes in rural and urban policy at Ohio State University.

People are concerned for a variety of reasons. They might fear food will become scarce if urban sprawl continues. They see homes being built on farmland at an increasing rate and they want open spaces. Or, they see urban areas being abandoned in favor of newer communities.

They may recognize that land use influences water quality and affects wildlife habitats. They may also recognize that changes in land use affect their taxes and the quality of services they receive. Whatever the reason, Libby said, it has propelled land use into the legislative limelight.

Recently, the Rural Responsibility Act was introduced by state Sen. Karen Gillmor, R-Old Fort. The bill mainly looks at the environmental concerns of large-scale production farming. A provision in the bill requires people buying property within a one-mile radius of a farm to sign a disclosure that states they understand that normal farming practices might create noises and odors.

This is just one of the bills to arise since the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force released its recommendations earlier this year. A group of Ohio legislators is in the process of converting the recommendations into a single omnibus legislative bill, which includes authority for communities to purchase or lease development rights from farmers. The bill,

which is tentatively slated to be introduced in early December, will also establish "agricultural security areas" where farming is clearly the top priority.

Security zones and purchase of development rights (PDR) programs reduce the uncertainty of the area's development, Libby explained. If farmers don't reinvest in the farm because they think the area will be developed soon, they become less competitive. Knowing that the farm will be able to operate without interference from development encourages farmers to maintain or even expand their businesses.

The most important implication of all these bills, whether they are passed or not, is simply that they have been proposed, Libby said. The task force, the legislation and other bills that address land use issues have given visibility to the issue of Ohio's shifting population and its effect on Ohio's agriculture.

For every 1 percent increase in population, urban land use increased 4.7 percent from 1960 to 1990, said Allen Prindle, an asso-

ciate professor of economics at Otterbein College in Westerville, who compiled trends data for the task force. Prindle is taking a sabbatical this quarter and working at Ohio State University.

During 1982 to 1992, land used for farming decreased 120,000 acres a year, or 7.5 percent. And, the highest population growth is in counties surrounding metro areas, while population is on a decline or slow growth in the center cities. People also are moving out of the rural southeastern Ohio counties.

Urban sprawl is expensive. Although taxes in new suburbs are

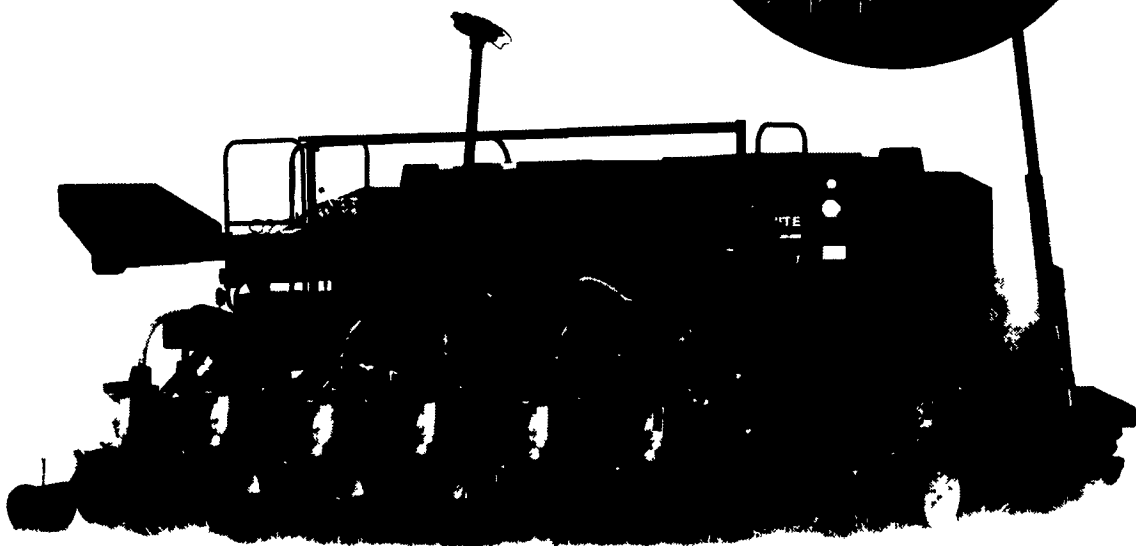
often higher, they are not high enough to pay for the new services, Libby said. People from non-farm areas tend to see open fields as unused space, when actually the fields are a key part of a food industry that is a major economic asset to the area.

"Some areas are going to continue to grow no matter what," Prindle said. "People involved in land use policies are trying to establish a balance between economic growth, both urban and rural, and protection of the natural and human resources used to support it."

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