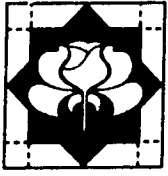


Agriculture Insights



**The
Lancaster
Chamber**
of Commerce & Industry

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Preserving good agricultural land by placing perpetual easements on farms makes good economic sense. In fact, only by preserving our farms can we be absolutely sure that the land and infrastructure required for profitable farming will be here for the next generation-and for generations after that!

The Big Myth

The claim that simply keeping farms profitable today will preserve them for tomorrow is nothing but a big myth. This inaccurate assertion misses the fact that in the short run, no farmer can beat the return for building houses or otherwise "developing." Certainly, some farmers are able and willing to delay "selling out to development," but for the most part, a rational "dollars-and-cents" approach eventually dooms such efforts to failure.

If the zoning permits it and

the demand is there, the farmland will continue to disappear. This simple fact points out the need for continuing an aggressive farmland preservation program-especially in areas such as southeastern Pennsylvania where the land is so fertile, and so threatened.

Preferential Assessment

Preferential assessment programs for agricultural use (such as "Clean and Green" in Pennsylvania) help farmers achieve some degree of tax equity. We all know that farmers pay far more in taxes than they get back in community services, and programs like Clean and Green help to make up for that disparity.

However, because those farm owners only commit to refraining from development for a limited period of time, there is no guarantee whatsoever that those farms are now or ever will be preserved. In other words, preferential assessments help keep farms profitable, but they do not preserve farms.

Planning and Zoning

As a part of public policy, agricultural preservation should fit into each community's long range

vision, and into the County's comprehensive plan. Growth is necessary to a healthy economy, and in Lancaster County, for example, urban growth is encouraged within well-defined village and urban growth boundaries. Preservation efforts are then focused on agricultural land outside those boundaries. With good reason, it's certainly tougher to farm when urban and suburban sprawl encroaches on farmland.

Of course the zoning that proceeds from good planning helps to prevent sprawl, but we all know that the combination of development pressure and change in local government can undo years of good planning. Preservation, on the other hand-particularly when several nearby farms are preserved-reinforces good planning and zoning in agricultural areas, just as it reinforces the local long-term commitment to farming. A strong preservation ethic helps to ensure that our precious agricultural lands are not viewed as simply empty lands waiting for a so-called higher and better use. Agricultural land is already highly developed.

The Future of Preservation

Currently some 5% of the best farmland in Pennsylvania is preserved. Most is preserved with public funds through the Pennsylvania Farmland Preservation Program; but a significant number of farms have been preserved by non-profit organizations such as Lancaster Farmland Trust. (More than half of the Trust's easements were donated by both "English" and Amish farmers.)

When funds are provided to preserve the thousand plus farms

still on the state's waiting list, the number of preserved farms will be over 2,000, nearly 10% of our best farms. This is a remarkable accomplishment when you consider we've been farming this land for some 250 years but have been preserving it for only 20 years!

Every effort should be made to find the funds to clear the waiting list. Once that critical task is completed, we must concentrate on efforts to provide appropriate continuing property tax breaks to landowners that preserve their farms. Easements are perpetual; and some perpetual benefit should

proceed from the commitment to preservation!

Back to Economics

The combination of planning and zoning, preferential assessments, and preservation benefits all our farmers. The record shows that critical farm infrastructure stays in place, and farms continue to get top dollar when they're sold-including preserved farms. The outlook for maintaining and enhancing farm prosperity is also bright. This is as it should be. If we can't be reasonably sure of preserving farming and farmers, we shouldn't be preserving farmland!

Conference Topics

"Farm and Food File," appears weekly in more than 70 newspapers throughout the United States and Canada, including *The Delmarva Farmer*.

The Feb. 17 action gets under way at 8 a.m. with coffee, doughnuts, and edible soybean snacks, plus the opportunity for farmers, educators, and agribusiness representatives to visit up to 50 educational and trade exhibits.

Admission to the conference is free. Tickets for the noon lunch may be purchased at the door for \$5 each. No advance ticket sales will be made, as in previous years. The formal program will end following the keynote speech at approximately 2 p.m., but the exhibit area will remain open for a least an hour.

Look for the Wicomico Youth and Civic Center behind the Salisbury Mall off Rt 50 in southeast Salisbury.

COLLEGE PARK, Md. - A look ahead, marketing, crop management, and environmental considerations - these are some of the hot topics to be presented during morning breakout sessions at the 19th annual Delmarva Corn and Soybean Technology Conference, Feb. 17 in the Wicomico Youth and Civic Center, Salisbury, Md.

The conference again is being sponsored by agribusinesses serving the Delmarva area and by cooperative extension at land-grant universities in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

Of special interest will be a keynote address during the noon lunch hour by Alan Guebert, an award-winning agricultural journalist from the heart of central Illinois farm country. Guebert's topic will be "The Financial State of Agriculture." His syndicated column, "The

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