

Land-Use Planning: What challenges Will The 21st Century Hold?

Agriculture Insights

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I recently had the opportunity to coordinate a tour for Jim Landers, a newspaper reporter for The Dallas Morning News, who was interested in writing a feature article on Lancaster County's land-use planning.

In order to give Landers a background on the planning activities in Lancaster County, we met with several County leaders including Lancaster County Commissioner Terry Kauffman, who made it evident that Lancaster has been in a decade long struggle with land-use planning. In fact, the County is at risk of losing significant acres of the precious farmland it is known for. One unique thing about Lancaster is that it is one of the only counties in Pennsylvania

where the building industry supports urban growth boundaries (UGB's).

Kauffman feels that in order to enact effective UGB's, the decision needs to remain in Lancaster County, not Harrisburg. A possible statewide planning board to create a vision for land use in PA may be beneficial, but a statewide planning board will not enhance the decisions for land-use in Lancaster's community, according to Kauffman.

To grasp the details and future direction of the UGB's we met with Ronald Bailey, the executive director of the Lancaster County Planning Commission. In 1994 the first UGB's were established to help contain growth but unfortunately they have had

limited effectiveness. In 1997, 75 percent of new homes were built within the UGB's. But the problem exists with the 25 percent of homes that were built outside the UGB's since they consumed 66 percent of the total land developed. The UGB's are set to control the next 20 years of growth, however at the current consumption of land, Lancaster County is growing at two to three times faster than predicted.

The answer to this rapid use of land lies in a couple of areas. First, we must use our current land within the UGB's more efficiently. Many of the current developments are using between half and one acre lot sizes, with some as big as five acres. If we were to make these lot sizes just a quarter acre or less, we could utilize our land much more effectively. We must also simplify the process of land development within the UGB's to prevent the spread outside of them, while making it more difficult to develop those acres outside the boundary.

To view land-use planning from a business perspective, we met with Dan Witmer, president of The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Witmer feels the heart of Lancaster's economy is primarily based on manufacturing and the business community, not on agriculture. He feels public preservation may not be the best answer in land use. According to Witmer, we must allow business growth to occur in the county in order to retain a healthy economy. He also noted that the Chamber supports Lancaster County's Comprehensive Plan and its related Urban Growth Boundaries.

It appears the future of Lancaster County's farmland is headed in a good direction as it anticipates the largest single contribution ever from the state to protect farms from development. As the County continues to lose over 2,500 acres of precious farmland a year, the nearly \$7 million in state money that is expected to pay for agricultural

conservation easements in Lancaster County is needed greatly. This extra money will allow the Lancaster Ag Preservation Board to purchase easements on 4,000 acres, some of which have waited since 1993. The Preservation Board views the expected 500,000 new residents in Lancaster County in the next 50 years as the biggest challenge in the future and the preservation of individual farms as just a small component in preserving the food chain.

A Chinese Proverb simply puts it, "The well-being of a people is like a tree: Agriculture is its root, manufacture and commerce are its branches and its leaves. If the root is injured, the leaves fall, the branches break away, and the tree dies." It seems impossible to try and solve the County's land use planning struggles, with one simple answer. There are many different angles and approaches that officials must look at when considering land-use strategies. The important thing is to plan for future growth of your county, so that when faced with those difficult decisions, a plan is intact to use that is agreed upon by both the agriculture and business communities.

Feel free to send your comments and ideas by email to Brent Landis at the Chamber at blandis@lcci.com or call him at 717-397-3531.

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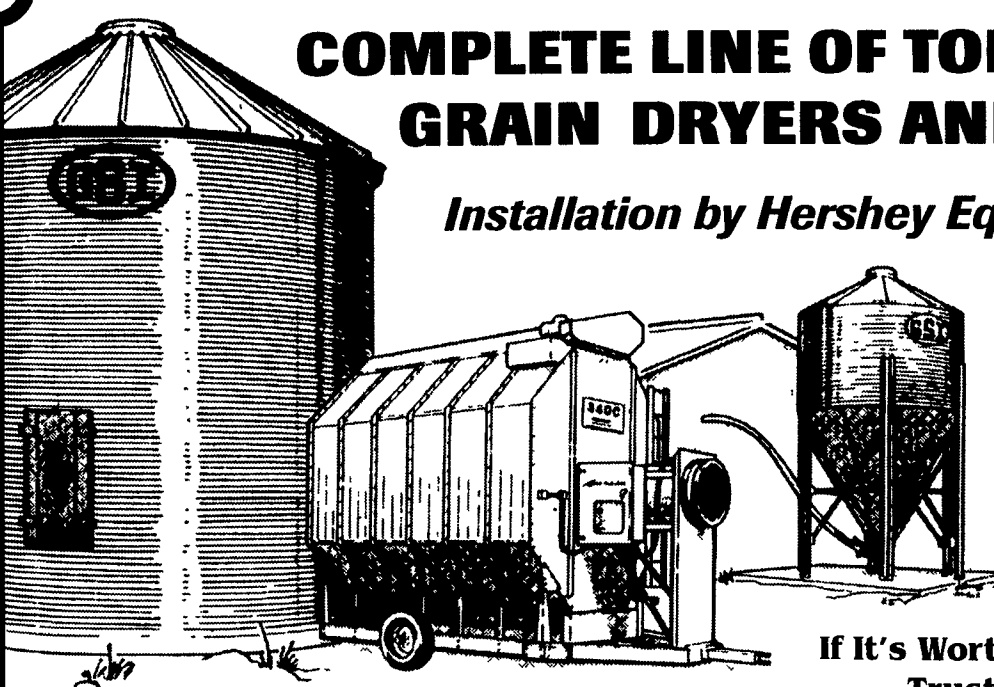
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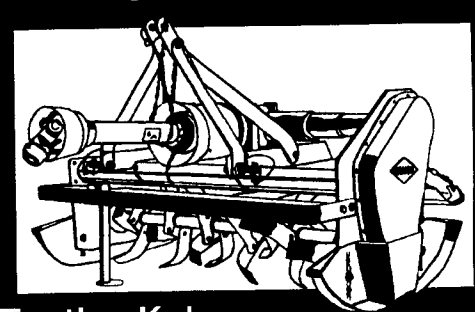
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