

Ag's Future, Ethanol Plans On Slate At Issues Forum

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generates the most economic spin-off in Lancaster County, Baldrige said. Another 35 percent of employment comes from the growing service industry.

About one in five jobs in the county are agriculture-related, with a total of 7,000 workers in production ag alone.

Beside employment opportunities, Lancaster County agriculture makes a number of other contributions to the economic and general welfare of the area, Baldrige pointed out.

Farms and rural culture are a primary draw for the \$1.3 billion annual tourist business here. The farm economy also makes a major contribution to the tax base while using only 7 cents of the tax dollar.

Another benefit, coming more into the spotlight in recent drought years, is the crucial role that open farmland plays in groundwater recharge.

"The list goes on and on," Baldrige said. "There's no denying the significance of agriculture."

However, because "Lancaster County has among the most expensive ag land in the U.S." and this farmland "is confined to small fields and nearby neighbors," the community needs to take a different approach in promoting a viable agriculture, according to Baldrige.

"For agriculture to continue its success, we need to change the message," he said.

This effort includes more than preserving farms, according to Baldrige.

"I believe in farmland preservation," he said. "It's important, but we shouldn't let that be the only message."

Baldrige recommended five examples of action to help keep farms and agribusinesses thriving in the county:

- Work to "preserve the farmer" by educating farmers and public officials on crucial topics.
- Ensure industrial-

zoned land is protected as well as farmland in order for ag-processing facilities and other agribusinesses to exist.

- Bolster an "ag-friendly" community through means such as promoting on-farm businesses and easing burdensome regulations.

- Develop a Lancaster brand of farm products.

- Create a vision for the future of the Lancaster County ag economy.

"Our local economy is very interrelated," Baldrige said. "We need each sector to prosper."

"Agriculture is an important industry in Pennsylvania, and Lancaster is a fertile place. Let's not let it go at that."

The forum also included an update on the prospects of an ethanol-producing plant in southcentral Pennsylvania.

Scott Welsh, project manager for Penn Mar Ethanol, LLC, said that the group is working on final site selection and full capitalization for an ethanol facility. A group of investors has committed to the project. Site selection is focused on the area of Cumber-

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Scott Welsh and Tom Baldrige, front row, from left, were speakers at an ag issues forum this week. Rear, from left, are Brent Landis, Mike Brubaker, and Bob Zook, forum directors. Photos by Dave Lefever

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