

Group Adds Muscle To Farmland Preservation

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Special To Lancaster Farming
LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — Armed with a fresh poll that shows Lancaster County residents overwhelmingly support saving farms from development, a private group is launching a major new effort to preserve many more farms here.

The Oxford Foundation Inc. in Strasburg hopes to strengthen existing local preservation groups by tapping national sources for millions of dollars in funding.

"Our desire is to pick up the pace of farmland preservation," said Marilyn Ware, secretary of Oxford Foundation's board of directors. The county's efforts "be long on a national stage." Ware called current farmland preservation work by the county Agricultural Preserve Board and the private, nonprofit Lancaster Farmland Trust "superb." But with the continued pressure of new housing and business development, those groups are not preserving enough farms fast enough, she said.

Most residents polled randomly recently by Susquehanna Polling and Research Inc. agree with

her. Of the 359 registered voters polled, a large majority said that they are concerned about the loss of farmland (88 percent) and that more protection of farmland is needed (79 percent). Most residents (66 percent) said the pace of growth and development is too fast, and commissioners should increase efforts to preserve farmland (61 percent).

The Oxford Foundation presented the findings of the poll to county commissioners and some commissioner candidates. Ware asked commissioners to approve a new \$50 million to \$100 million bond issue to pay for preserving farms — a move favored by nearly six out of 10 people who were polled.

Approving a new bond issue would show that the local commitment to farmland preservation remains strong, Ware said. The move would strengthen the county's chances of receiving additional federal matching money. Exactly how much federal money may be available for local preservation is not yet known, but Oxford Foundation Director Philip Calhoun thinks it will be "substantial."

"We are hoping to create a national momentum," said June Mengel, who will be working part time with the Oxford Foundation. "On a small scale, it would be millions, and we would hope to expand that." The Oxford Foundation will work to make that opportunity happen. It is also seeking funds from The Conservation Fund, the American Farmland Trust, the National Geographic Society, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

"We're all in some way on the same team," Ware said, adding that the Oxford Foundation is committing to three years of work with the initiative. The call for funds from national sources is not falling on deaf ears.

"What place in the country is farmland more important to the economy and identity than Lancaster County," asked Ed McMahon, vice president for programs with The Conservation Fund, which is based outside Washington. "It is known throughout America. If we cannot save farmland in Lancaster County, than where can we save it?"

"We think Lancaster County could serve as a model for other counties in Pennsylvania," McMahon said. Local preservationists were obviously happy with the news of a possibility of additional funding. "I think it is wonderful," said Rich Doenges, Agricultural Preserve Board director. "We have a significant unmet need from owners of farmland."

"The support has been very good from the commissioners, but we need more to get a chance to get into this backlog that we have."

So far, 515 farms total-

ing 45,348 acres have been preserved by the Agricultural Preserve Board. In addition, nine farms, amounting to 762 acres, have been approved for preservation, but the transactions have not yet been settled, Doenges said.

The Lancaster Farmland Trust has also preserved more than 10,000 acres here. Commissioner Chairman Paul Thibault acknowledged that, with funds generated by a 1999 bond soon running out, the Oxford Foundation's call for a new bond issue "comes at an opportune moment."

But, Thibault said, "I really haven't formed any opinion on it yet. We have to get new money if we're going to continue (farmland preservation) at any pace. It comes down to the age-old question of how to pay for it."

Commissioners approved a special \$25 million bond issue for farmland preservation in 1999. Doenges said he expects funds from the bond will be extinguished by the end of this year. Mengel admitted it will be a challenge to pull together the funding sources needed to preserve as much of the county's 300,000 agriculturally-zoned acres as possible.

The Oxford Foundation is a private family foundation dedicated to promoting excellence in health, human services, education, early childhood development, historic and environmental preservation, arts and culture, and public policy planning.

Editor's note: This story originally appeared in a slightly different version in the Oct. 22 Lancaster New Era. New Era staff writers Tim Mekeel and Patricia Poist contributed to this report.

Power Expo Nov. 12-13

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Power Expo 2003 (Landscape, Nursery, and Turf Power Equipment Expo) will debut Nov. 12-13, at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex in Harrisburg.

Organizers expect to draw up to 4,000 attendees, among them landscape contractors and nursery owners, highway/park maintenance personnel, municipalities, school districts, and a whole host of other prospective buyers. Visit the PLNA Website at www.plna.com or call (800) 898-3411.

The show will host exhibitors, comprised of equipment companies and suppliers to the landscape, nursery, and turf industries.

Other highlights of Power Expo 2003 will be the first demonstration area in Pennsylvania, a Power Equipment Rodeo, and hands-on education. For a complete line-up of events, visit www.plna.com.

Exhibit booth space is still available for Power Expo 2003. For more information, contact Linda Weiss at (800) 898-3411 or lweiss@plna.com.



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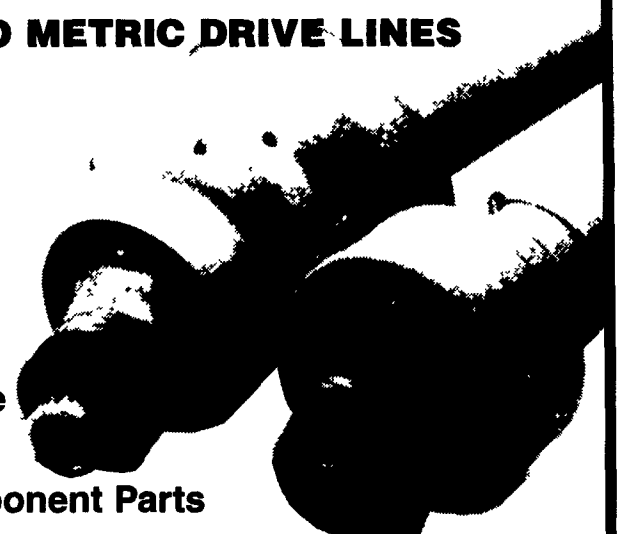
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