

Bill Could Have Jeopardized Farmland Preservation

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bill are pleased with the result.

"Grange is extremely pleased that there was an overwhelming vote to preserve farmland in Pennsylvania," said Brenda Shambaugh, legislative director for Pennsylvania State Grange. "The precedent set, once an agriculture restriction is in place, it remains intact. We (the Grange) would like to thank the legislators who voted to defeat this legislation and support agriculture in Pennsylvania."

However, Shambaugh notes that this bill could be reconsidered at a later date, because a reconsideration vote was taken and passed.

"Pennsylvania Farm Bureau appreciates the vote, but we also know the legislation may be brought back for more consideration soon," said Guy Donaldson, president of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau.

Donaldson noted, "We recognize that all members of the House are concerned about the preservation of farmland in the commonwealth. In this instance, some have been tempted to stray from their convictions. Because passage of the legislation would set harmful precedents for farmland preservation in Pennsylvania, we're hopeful that our lawmakers will ultimately give this

legislation a proper burial."

The Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and Pennsylvania State Grange stepped up their grassroots efforts to defeat this bill in the days before its vote in the House.

Both organizations plan to monitor the status of the bill.

If passed, the bill could set precedent not only for state-owned farmland, but also for Pennsylvania's farmland preservation programs.

"We think it is a dangerous precedent issue," said Donaldson. "If this happens, what does it do to our farmland preservation program?"

One component of the bill was the permitting the transfer of the agricultural restrictions on the 22 acres to a 46-acre site in Elk Township. Donaldson expressed concerns, that, if allowed, the bill could impact agricultural land preservation programs, opening the door for ag restriction movements.

"We are very pleased that the House has voted to maintain the integrity of the Ag Land Preservation program," said State Grange Master Betsy Huber. "Permanently preserved land should be just that, permanent, with no transfer of the easement permitted without a very important reason for the public good. Any weakening of the program

would have a negative effect on future covenants."

Heidi Schellenger, executive director of Lancaster Farmland Trust (LFT), noted that LFT has been remaining aware of the bill's activity because of the impact it could have on easements.

"We need to maintain the sanctity of an easement," said Schellenger, stressing that an easement "is a perpetual promise" to protect farmland.

House Bill 66 was introduced at the beginning of the implementation of Warren County's comprehensive plan. The plan was developed to generate economic growth for the county.

According House Bill 66, Warren County is facing several economic challenges, such as an unemployment rate of 19 percent, decreasing county population, and a high percentage of county lands owned by the state or federal government, which limits the county tax base.

However, as the defeat of House Bill 66 will forbid the development of the agriculture lands, other options are available for developers in Warren County.

One option, a brownfield located to the west of War-

ren, is a possibility for development.

Formerly a manufacturing facility, located on Rt. 6, brownfield owner Cindy Morrison stresses her family is actively looking to revitalize it. Calling the brownfield "blighted," Morrison believes that a proposed Wal-Mart would help to revitalize the area.

Vacant since 1995, the property is home to three manufacturing plants. Working with Cambridges Services, Morrison is "expecting a contact from Wal-Mart," with the defeat of House Bill 66.

Warren County Commissioner-elect David Bauer said he does

not know what the outgoing Warren County Board of Commissioners will do next in reaction to the bill's defeat. However, Bauer said, "No matter what happens, the new board has to handle the fallout."

Bauer noted that Warren County does not have a county farmland preservation program. He is confident that, as he and the new commissioner board takes office on Jan. 5, it will change.

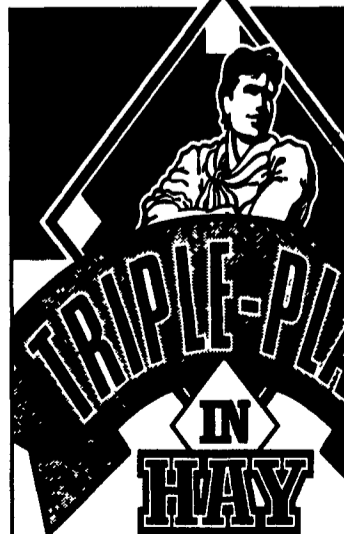
"Warren County will be the next county to join the state farmland conservation program. It's about time we looked at how we use our natural resources."



This 22-acre property pictured from Jackson Run road in front of the Warren State Hospital Complex is at the heart of Pennsylvania's farmland preservation controversy. House Bill 66, which was defeated Tuesday in the House of Representatives, proposed to remove agriculture restrictions on the property for commercial development.

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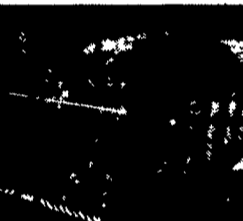
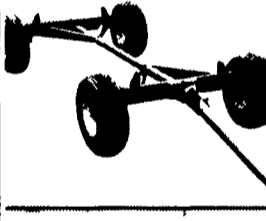





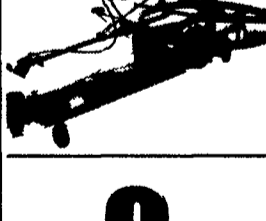


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