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Farm Follows Function: In Lancaster County Pennsylvania, Saving Farms Means Keeping a Lid on Growth

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Abstract
When I arrived in Lancaster County, in May of 1989, every acre of land seemed to be for sale. The county's farmland preservation program that I was to head had saved only 5,600 acres, less than one percent of the entire county.

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Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitor Bureau

Courtesy Lancaster County

Two-thirds of the land in Lancaster County is used for farming, and most of the towns (like Maytown, right) are small.

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, saving farms means keeping a lid on growth.

By Thomas L. Daniels, AICP

When I arrived in Lancaster County, in May of 1989, every acre of land seemed to be for sale. The county's farmland preservation program that I was to head had saved only 5,600 acres, less than one percent of the entire county.

But worse, the idea that a farmer might limit the use of land to farming by selling development rights to the government had split the farm community. Some frowned on the use of tax dollars, others claimed it was a bailout for poor farmers—but some thought that it was a way to keep development from overrunning some of America's finest farmland.

I had my own doubts. Already, the northeastern part of Lancaster County had come under the growing influence of suburban Philadelphia, roughly 40 miles to the east. The county population had recently topped 400,000, and Lancaster was touted as the fastest growing county in Pennsylvania.

It soon became clear to me that Lancaster County had a lot to lose from uncoordinated growth: great expanses of carefully tended fields and farmsteads, quaint villages, and the clip-clop of Amish farmers' horse-drawn buggies—small wonder that five million visitors a year came to witness what seemed like days gone by.

But in some places the landscape was changing to a schizophrenic mix: white-washed Amish barns in sight of gaudy suburban strip malls and 19th century brick villages surrounded by sprawling pastel subdivisions.

I became convinced that protecting the farmland was the key to shaping the county's future growth. Fortunately, many farmers tilled land that had been in their families for several generations. The Amish and Plain Mennonites operated about one-third of the farms, adding to the enduring culture of family farming.

This farm culture translated into an unusually strong farming economy. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture, county farmers reaped over $766 million in 1997 from the sale of milk, poultry, hogs, and corn, hay, soybeans, and wheat, placing Lancaster County among the top 20 farming counties nationwide. Moreover, almost two-thirds of the county, some 390,000 acres, were in farm use, and there were 4,700 farms, nearly all family-run.

Thirty of the county's 41 townships (averaging about 15,000 acres in size) had adopted agricultural zoning ordinances that typically allowed only one dwelling on up to two acres for every 25 acres owned. With a metropolitan size population and a powerful farming base, the county already had done a fairly good job of balanced growth. My mission was to help maintain that balance.

Collaring growth

The primary challenge under American planning law is how to accommodate growth without sacrificing those qualities that make a place good to live and work. Faced with the prospect of absorbing tens of thousands of new residents, the county planning commission in the early 1990s began promoting "growth boundaries" after the Oregon model.

County planning staff made population projections over the next 20 years for each township and borough (village). Staff then estimated land-use needs based on the expected population, drafted maps of possible growth boundaries, and met with local officials to negotiate the actual boundaries.

Pennsylvania law makes no provision for growth boundaries, nor does the county government have any authority over planning and zoning in the townships and boroughs. So the 22 boundaries that have been agreed upon so far have been done by amending local comprehensive plans and by coordinating local zoning ordinances and public sewer and water service areas of the townships and the boroughs.

Significantly, developers bought into the growth boundary concept because it gave them predictability: land to build on without costly rezoning and NIMBY battles. Even Wal-Mart, which proposed six new stores in the county in the 1990s, selected sites inside growth boundaries. Two stores have been built to date.

In 1999, the county planning commission undertook a "Growth Tracking" study of where development had occurred from 1994 to 1997. About 75 percent of the new residential units were built inside the growth boundaries, but 61 percent of the land developed was outside the boundaries.

Much as I supported the growth boundary strategy, I recognized that if development were going to be channeled inside the growth boundaries, then building in the countryside would have to become more difficult. Also, it was crucial to plot where the growth boundaries would expand over time. If the growth boundaries expanded into good farming areas, then the farmland preservation effort would be jeopardized.

In nine years, I helped to preserve 188 farms on more than 16,000 acres. The preservation effort involved several players: Over the nine years, the county contributed $12 million and the state $19 million to buy development rights, local officials continued to support the use of agricultural zoning, the nonprofit Lancaster Farmland Trust acquired development rights to 6,000 acres through purchases and donations, and the farm community bought into all the options available for saving farmland.

Amish and Mennonite farms attract five million visitors a year to the county.

Don Sheak, Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitor Bureau

Setting the standard

Today, Lancaster County has over 30,000 acres of preserved farmland and 375 preserved farms, more preserved farms than any other county in the nation. Through the end of 1999, the county had spent $14 million and the state $22 million to buy development rights, and the Farmland Trust had preserved 6,600 acres.

Now, too, there is a waiting list of 200 farmers who have applied to the county to sell their development rights. This is an indication of the greater sense of trust between the landowners and the county government, and a strong commitment to the future of farming in the county.

Many other local farmland preservation programs have focused on preserving scattered farms. But Lancaster County has successfully pursued two strategies: creating large

Resources

In Pennsylvania. For more information on Lancaster County, contact June Mengel at the Agricultural Preserve Board, mengelj@co.lancaster.pa.us, 717-299-8355, or Scott Standish at the Planning Commission, standish@co. lancaster.pa.us, 717-299-8333. Address: 50 North Duke St., P.O. Box 83480, Lancaster, PA 17608-3480.

Elsewhere. A good source of information on farmland protection is Farmland Preservation Report, 900 LaGrange Road, Street, MD 21154; 410-692-2708. Marin County, California, combines agricultural zoning with purchase of development rights. Contact: Bob Berner, 415-663-1158, Marin Agricultural Land Trust, P.O. Box 809, Point Reyes Station, CA 94956. Montgomery County, Maryland, has preserved over 40,000 acres of farmland through the transfer of development rights. Contact John Zawitoski, 301-590-2831, Montgomery County Ag Services, 18410 Muncaster Rd., Derwood, MD 20855.

contiguous blocks of preserved farmland—which helps to keep development away and to maintain a "critical mass" of farms that enables the farm support businesses to thrive—and preserving farms just outside of designated growth boundaries to protect high-quality farming areas.

The preserved farms also dovetailed beautifully with the local agricultural zoning, which now covers 349,000 acres and is found in 39 of the 41 townships. The zoning has greatly limited the amount of nonfarm development that could take place next to a preserved farm. It has also kept down the cost of the development rights to under $2,000 an acre on average, less than half the price of what suburban Philadelphia counties without ag zoning have paid.

Property rights have not been much of an issue because the sale of development rights is a voluntary program and the Pennsylvania courts have affirmed the legality of agricultural zoning.

According to Bob Wagner of the American Farmland Trust, "Lancaster County is setting the pace for farmland preservation in the United States." Moreover, Lancaster County has shown that a conservative Republican stronghold can be a leader in growth management.

The county's experience illustrates the added strength of land-use regulation wedded to financial incentives. Land regulation is the foundation of growth management, but it is prey to politicians' whims. Buying development rights creates permanence in the landscape.

Land-use planning in America has basically involved planning for development. The Lancaster County combination of planning, regulation, and incentive payments taught me, among others, that it is not only possible to plan for permanence, but desirable, too.

In 1998, the county planning commission asked 100 community leaders what was the best trend in the county over the previous five years. The most popular response? Farmland preservation.

Watch out

Lancaster County remains vulnerable to rapid population growth, weak planning, and short-sighted solutions to transportation problems. In 1998, the county planning commission estimated that the county's population will grow by 30 percent, to 600,000 people, by 2020.

An obvious weakness in the township zoning is the more than 150,000 acres zoned for rural residential development in one- to three-acre lots. Meanwhile, the county planning commission has been lax in not pushing conservation zoning, legal in Pennsylvania at one dwelling per 10 acres, in rural areas unsuitable for farming.

To be successful, according to the planning commission's Growth Tracking report, the growth boundaries will need to absorb about 80 percent of new development and at a density of 5.5 units per acre. But with many rural home sites available, these benchmarks will be difficult to achieve. The Growth Tracking report found that from 1994 to 1997 development inside the boundary has averaged about 2.5 to three units per acre, suggesting that the boundaries will fill up fairly rapidly and merely create contained sprawl.

The planning commission is advocating the creation of "livable communities" within the growth boundaries, based on neotraditional village designs. But so far there has been little progress, according to Scott Standish, head of long-range planning for the county.

Driving around Lancaster County is an adventure in congestion. Currently under study is the construction of a limited access highway that would run 30 miles from the city of Lancaster east to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The road would cut through Amish farmland and make much of the county accessible to suburban Philadelphia. Mass transit in Lancaster County can only be described as severely limited.

The county's strengths continue to be its resilient farming community, growth boundaries, widespread local agricultural zoning, and an aggressive purchase of development rights program.

In 1999, the State of Pennsylvania authorized a total of $65 million for farmland preservation. Combined state and county funding will give the Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board about $10 million more than it has already spent, enough to buy development rights to another 5,000 acres. Since 1994, the acres of farmland preserved and the acres developed each year have been running neck and neck, according to June Mengel, Director of the Agricultural Preserve Board. In 1997, for example, more acres (2,852) were preserved in the county than developed (2,776), a feat that few places in America could even imagine.

In short, the county is in a race against time, with a window of opportunity to maintain its balanced growth. Although I left Lancaster County in 1998, I look forward to returning every so often to see the farm fields that I so enjoy.

Will the growth management techniques be enough to maintain the farming industry and high quality of life? Or will sprawl steadily eat through the countryside?

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