

H O U R G L A S S



F O U N D A T I O N

Issue Overview...

...Farmland Preservation

Farmland Preservation probably matters as much in Lancaster County as anywhere else in the nation.

H O U R G L A S S



F O U N D A T I O N

123 NORTH PRINCE STREET + LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

To understand the importance of this issue in our region, consider a fact highlighted in a recent report from the Lancaster Farmland Trust. At the close of World War II, Los Angeles County, California ranked first in the nation in total agricultural production. Now, the city of angels --and highways-- barely ranks in the top 100. In just little more than one generation, an entire economy and culture has been altered forever.

By comparison, agriculture has remained the leading industry in Lancaster. According to the most recent agricultural census, 388,000 of the county's 603,000 acres are still devoted to farming. The Soil Conservation Service rates over half of that land as Class I or Class II soil --considered "prime" farmland. The results are indisputable. The county's 4,700 farms produce 20 percent of all Pennsylvania's agricultural products --generating over \$815 million in annual revenues.

Yet these exceptionally profitable farms have struggled to justify their existence in the face of even more profitable commercial and residential developments. As the price of land has skyrocketed, many farmers find it impossible to resist selling some or all of their property. "It's just a matter of when they're going to sell," a major developer recently told the Philadelphia Inquirer, "Everyone sells someday." During the last two decades, Pennsylvania has lost over 1.3 million acres of farmland --mostly to subdivisions and malls-- and experts estimate that Lancaster County alone has been losing almost 3,000 acres of prime land per year. According to Lancaster County Planning Commission director Ronald Bailey, the biggest problem has been about the breadth of the development. "Lancaster County in the 1980s grew by just about the same population -- about 60,000 residents -- as the City of Lancaster contains," Bailey told author Tom Hylton. "The difference is the City of Lancaster takes up about 7.2 square miles, while in the past decade we've converted somewhere between sixty and seventy square miles of agricultural land to accommodate the same number of people." That is why the American Farmland Trust dubbed the region the nation's second-most threatened agricultural area and organizations like the World Monument Fund and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have added the county to their list of endangered historical sites.

In response to this crisis, the state of Pennsylvania and Lancaster County have mobilized extraordinary resources to preserve farmland. Local governments in Lancaster began addressing the issue as early as 1976, when East Donegal Township became the first municipality to adopt special zoning for agricultural areas. Since that time, Tom Daniels, former director of the Agricultural Preserve Board, reports that thirty-eight other townships have adopted ordinances and a total of 349,000 acres are zoned for agriculture. The state of Pennsylvania had some Open Space programs in place as early as the 1970s, but the state government did not truly begin to focus on the goal of farmland preservation until 1981. That year, the state legislature passed Act 43, authorizing municipalities to create "agricultural security areas" that provided benefits such as (1) strengthened right-to-farm, (2) greater protection against eminent domain, and (3) the option to sell development rights to county Agricultural Preserve Boards. By the late 1990s, there were 30 security areas in Lancaster County containing over 120,000 acres. Across the commonwealth, more than 2.5 million acres have been enrolled in security areas.

However, an even greater initiative came in 1987 when the state's voters approved a \$100 million bond issue dedicated to farmland preservation. The state added to this pool of funds in 1994 by dedicating a portion of the cigarette tax to the preservation program. During the 1990s, the Philadelphia Inquirer reports that the state managed to preserve about 131,000 acres through this effort. The principal local purchasing agents for the state preservation program are the various Agricultural Preserve Boards. These public agencies arrange what are called the purchase of development rights (PDR) through a legal device known as a "conservation easement." This mechanism allows a farmer to retain title to his or her land while creating a restriction --or easement-- on the deed that limits its use to farming or open space. Easements can "run with the land" forever or can be imposed for a strict period of time. During the 1990s, the Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board purchased over 200 easements on nearly 20,000 acres. Recognizing this success, the Lancaster County Commissioners recently agreed to float an additional \$25 million bond issue to support future farmland purchases by the Agricultural Preserve Board.

But what is perhaps most impressive about farmland preservation in Lancaster County is that there ex-

ists a strong public/private partnership. The Agricultural Preserve Board is not the only player in the PDR game. Lancaster Farmland Trust, a private non-profit organization, has also been active purchasing conservation easements toward the goal of preserving farmland. Their role is especially vital in Lancaster County where many plain sect Amish and Mennonite farmers prefer to deal with private entities rather than government agencies.

Although farmland preservation programs are generally very popular, there are critics on both principle and practice. Some libertarians object to what they perceive as a futile attempt by the government to distort market realities. Builders have fiercely opposed any attempts to place permanent boundaries on growth. On a more practical level, there have also been widespread complaints about delays in implementing the preservation program. The Philadelphia Inquirer reports that the funds have "dwindled" and a waiting list of more than 1,500 farmers now exists. Some observers criticize the limited scope of the program. According to recent testimony before the US Senate, during the previous 20 years, Lancaster County's open space acquisition programs have protected only 7.7 percent of the county's farmland. But arguably the most damaging critique of farmland preservation efforts have come from newspapers and taxpayer groups that have exposed what might be considered the pork barrel nature of the program. Several prominent legislator-farmers (including some from Lancaster County) have sold conservation easements on their own properties to the Agricultural Preserve Boards creating at least an appearance of impropriety and favoritism.

Nevertheless, most recent studies indicate that farmland preservation is both popular and efficient. During our 1998 quality-of-life survey, the Hourglass Foundation discovered that an overwhelming majority of county residents identify suburban sprawl as the number one threat to their lifestyle and wholeheartedly endorse the concept of farmland preservation. And according to a soon-to-be-released report prepared for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Millersville University economics professor Mike Gumpfer estimates that the per-acre annual benefit from the preservation of farmland is \$6,143 to the average tax-paying Lancaster Countian, while the actual cost for preserving that acre is only \$1,821.

In 1998, the Hourglass Foundation called for a \$50 million bond at the county level to support additional farmland preservation. The following year, the County Commissioners agreed to a \$25 million bond. The issue has not gone away. We continue to advocate increased efforts, and more efficient practices, in the quest to preserve farmland and maintain our cultural heritage.

Related Links:

American Farmland Trust www.farmlandinfo.org/

Center for Rural Pennsylvania www.ruralpa.org/

Greenworks On-Line Video Saving Lancaster County Farms
www.greenworkschannel.org/landuse/save_lancaster_farm.htm

Historic Preservation Trust of Lancaster County
www.lancaster.net/community/preservation/100/index.html

Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board www.co.lancaster.pa.us/Agpresrv.htm

Lancaster County Conservation District
www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/Conservation/Lancaster/lancaste.htm

Lancaster Farmland Trust www.savelancasterfarms.org/

PA Builders Association (PBA) www.pahomes.org/

PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) www.dep.state.pa.us/

Philadelphia Inquirer Special Report Cost of Development
www.philly.com/packages/acre/default.asp

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Special Report Devil in Lancaster County
www.post-gazette.com/forum/19981007edclarke4.asp