Farmland Protection:

What's Behind the Growing Interest?

by Keith Schneider

LOWELL, MI – As it happened, the rain stopped on May 15, 2006, the morning that a caravan of late model vehicles dropped a swirl of local dignitaries, including a state senator, one of Michigan's wealthiest philanthropists, and two TV reporters on Lloyd Flanagan's farm in the green countryside 25 miles from Grand Rapids. Mr. Flanagan, a sturdy man whose family raised crops and livestock since 1947 on the corner of 4 Mile Road and Lake Murray Avenue, greeted his guests with a smile and a hearty handshake.

In this part of West Michigan modesty is a virtue. Mr. Flanagan listened quietly, shifting his weight and fingering the bill of his worn baseball cap as speakers extolled the farm's natural beauty, the family's good work, and the $580,000 that Kent County raised to buy the development rights and make sure 145 acres of good Flanagan ground would be forever used solely for agriculture. At the program's end, Mr. Flanagan and his wife, Kathleen, who have two sons and a daughter, received a handsome sign commemorating the occasion.

"It's been in the family all these years," Mr. Flanagan said afterwards. "I want it preserved. I want to see it stay a farm and see it set up so my son can take over."

> LOCAL AND STATE CAMPAIGNS TO PROTECT FARMLAND HAVE SURMOUNTED PARTISAN, CLASS, RACE, AND POLITICAL IMPEDIMENTS

The ceremony, gracious in its simplicity, marked the second farm permanently protected by Kent County's four-year-old Farmland Preservation Program. But what was most significant was the event's location in a county that not only is among the largest farm producers in Michigan, but also is among the state's fastest growing and most politically conservative. Here in a region where mixing the basic ingredients of farmland preservation – open ground, government oversight, and public spending – often arouses considerable ire, a new and much more supportive attitude about the value of farms, farmers, and farmland is quickly developing.

The switch in allegiance is as evident in this part of Michigan as it is in countless other regions of the nation where local and state campaigns to protect farmland have surmounted partisan, class, race, and political impediments to become a powerful, though little noticed economic and political movement in the United States. From New England to Southern California, Florida to Washington State, and countless places in between, local planning officials are teaming up with elected leaders, nonprofit conservancies, and the farm community to spend nearly $500 million annually to preserve more than 400,000 acres of orchard and crop land, according to farmland conservancies.

Though the nation's farmland protection efforts also include enacting new zoning rules, taking steps to enhance farm profitability, and enforcing state right-to-farm laws in order to help farmers stay in business, paying farmers to permanently set aside land solely for agriculture is seen as far and away the most effective solution to farmland loss.

The reason? "It's voluntary," says Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau, who's working to establish a farmland protection program in southern California, in one of the nation's largest farm counties. "The other important element is it doesn't cost much. It's much less expensive than building roads and sewers and all the

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MICHIGAN LAND USE INSTITUTE

Farms in Leelanau County, in northwest lower Michigan, face increased development pressure as the County's population has surged 33 percent since 1990.

Farmland Protection

continued from previous page

other costs that come out of land development."

This year alone Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey will spend $386 million on farmland preservation. The number of local land trust organizations – critical institutions to farmland protection – grew to 1,537 in 2003, according to the Land Trust Alliance, 324 more than in 1998. The Trust For Public Land, a national land conservancy, found that since 1994, 384 local and state ballot measures to protect farmland have been put before voters; 312 or 81 percent were approved.

"We're seeing farmland conservation initiatives approved by voters by equal margins, usually more than 60 percent, in counties carried by George Bush, and counties carried by John Kerry," notes Will Abberger, the associate director of conservation finance based in the Trust For Public Land's office in Tallahassee, Florida. "This is not, by any stretch, a partisan issue at the local or state level."

Neither is it in Kent County. Here, as in most of the other regions concerned about the loss of farmland, a tide of new homes is pushing east out of Grand Rapids, the state's second largest city, and steadily topping one ridge after another as it approaches Lowell, a bedroom and farm community of 4,000. The spread of new homes and families, and their attendant needs – wider roads, longer sewer and water lines, new schools, and retail developments – is becoming an ever heavier tax burden for the county's 594,000 residents. Rampant construction also has intruded on Kent County's view of itself as a largely rural, quiet, almost changeless place apart from everywhere else.

But as most planning officials who have put their toes in the farmland conservation pond know, nothing happens without convincing the producers themselves to also wade in. In the 1990s, as Kent County grew twice as fast as the state, adding 7,400 new residents a year, it dawned on farmers that the effect of rapid development was becoming more than an annoyance.

True, farmers understood that growth increased land values. But development congested rural roads, caused subdivisions to sprout on the edges of fields, and produced enough general clamor to impede farmers' ability to efficiently participate in a county farm economy that supported 318 commercial farms, 4,500 farm-related jobs, and $150 million in annual farm sales.

"It's happening very fast," says Mr. Flanagan. "They just built an elementary school out here in the country."

"It's just getting harder and harder with all the growth to farm around here," adds Jay Hoekstra, a planner with the Grand Valley Metro Council, the regional planning agency.

Though several popular farmland conservation measures are available in Michigan and in Kent County – agricultural zoning, farm profitability enhancement programs, Michigan's right-to-farm statute, and a state farmland property tax reduction program – the tool of choice in Kent and in many other Michigan counties is purchasing farmland development rights. Four years ago, United Growth of Kent County, a civic organization affiliated with Michigan State University, played an influential role in convincing the Kent County Board of Commissioners to approve a county-sanctioned program.

First implemented by Suffolk County, New York in 1974, the idea of the purchase of development rights program is to pay farmers a substantial per-acre fee that amounts to the difference in value of the land for building homes and businesses, and its use as farmland. In exchange for selling the "development right," farmers agree to attach a conservation easement to the deed that puts the ground off limits to anything other than farming.

Until 1994, when Peninsula Township north of Traverse City, Michigan established the Midwest's first local program, the idea of buying and selling such rights, and drawing up conservation easements, was considered a wacky idea, appropriate for the coasts, but not considered palatable or needed in the Heartland.

That's no longer the case. Kendall and Kane counties in Illinois have established programs, as have two towns in Dane County in Wisconsin. Michigan now has six publicly-funded township programs and this year voters in two counties – Lapeer and Leelanau – are considering establishing the state's first county-financed farmland conservation programs.

Kent County, meanwhile, along with four of its townships have among the most active farmland preservation programs in the Midwest. Some 112 families in 12 townships have submitted applications for funding to preserve more than 8,000 acres of farmland. Nearly $3 million has been raised from foundations, state and federal farmland preservation programs, local donors, taxpayers, and the landowners themselves.

All told, efforts in Kent County have

About the drawings

The four drawings accompanying this article are by Jean Carlson Masseau, of Hinesburg, Vermont. They reflect her interest in the local farm community. On this page, Andy LaPierre helps a visitor feed a calf at his family's farm. On page 5, haying at the Addison County Fair and Field Days. On page 7, "Topper" and Andy LaPierre. Also on page 7, Harry Russell of Hinesburg grooms a draft horse in preparation for spring sugaring.

amassed enough money to conserve 700 to 750 acres at the going rate of roughly $3,500 to $4,000 per acre. Perhaps two more farms, including one owned by a neighbor of Mr. Flanagan, are likely to be preserved before the end of the year. "I can tell you there is a lot of interest here in preserving farmland," says Kendra Wills, a land use educator at Michigan State University who staffs the Kent County Agricultural Preservation Board. "I get at least one call a week from a farmer asking about the program.

Still, there is unease, in and out of the farm community.

Farmers tend to be suspicious even though the farmland purchase program is becoming more familiar. "It takes some time, but I've been talking to a lot of farmers here. More are interested than they've ever been in this program," observes Mr. Flanagan.

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Growth & Farming in Lancaster County

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a region so renowned for its Amish farms and verdant fields that in the mid-1980s the farm culture was as much a star in the love story movie thriller "Witness" as Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis. The 1980s, though, also was a decade of striking population growth and housing development. By the mid-1990s, the very same farm where Witness was filmed came under threat as the county's population topped 450,000, almost 130,000 more residents than in 1970.

By then, however, Lancaster County was on its way to establishing what is generally regarded as the most successful farmland protection program in the nation. In 1980, the county established a farmland preservation program, and three years later hired staff to administer a purchase of development rights program. In the years since, easements on 791 parcels totaling just over 68,000 acres have been purchased.

In 1992, at the insistence of residents and many in the farm and business communities, county planners wrote a new growth management plan that called for adding more farmland protection measures, including establishing agricultural preserves; large areas of farmland protected from new development. The plan encouraged the county's 60 municipalities, 18 boroughs, 41 townships, and Lancaster City to cooperate in establishing designated growth areas, where new, higher density development would be encouraged. Some 13 growth areas were mapped and local governments were asked to write new zoning measures to limit development to one home for every 20 to 25 acres in agricultural areas. The plan has been updated twice, most recently this past April.

Three years ago the county audited development in local jurisdictions and found that six of every ten acres consumed for residential development were outside the 13 growth areas. But since then, says Mary Frey, a principal planner with the Lancaster County Planning Commission, the goals of the master plan are closer to being reached. Local governments have established and enforced effective agricultural zoning on much of the 411,000 acres of farmland, about 67 percent of the county's total land (according to Frey, the County considers effective agricultural zoning to be no more than one lot subdivided for each 20 acres under single ownership).

The buildable land – that is, land free of environmental constraints such as steep slopes, floodplains, and wetlands – inside the 13 growth areas amounts to 31,000 acres, enough to accommodate the county's recent population increases and housing needs. All but 13,000 acres within the growth areas have water and sewer service, allowing for higher density. "Seventy-five percent of the new homes are being built in the growth areas, but we want to reach 85 percent by 2030, as well as reduce the amount of acreage used by dwellings built in rural areas," Ms. Frey notes.

"We have a strong building industry association in the county," she adds. "They were on board with this. A lot of people realize that if we enhance the growth areas with more density, more affordability, it takes the pressure off the farmland. You hear farmers and business people saying the same thing."

Lancaster County's planning and zoning policies are designed to preserve productive farmland, while reducing the number of scattered residences outside of growth areas, like the housing above.

LANCASTER COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

Farmland Protection

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A more important critic is the land development community, led by local homebuilder and realtor organizations, which view farmland conservation as an intrusion on the free market and a way for taxpayers to, in the words of the Grand Rapids Association of Realtors, "foot the bill to permanently preserve land they have no access to."

The resistance has convinced the Kent County Commission not to invest any of its general funds in farmland conservation. But a new farmland preservation advocacy organization, co-chaired by a prominent farmer, formed in May. The group, Citizens for Kent County Farmland and Open Space Preservation, promotes county investment in farm conservation, and supports a slate of county commission candidates that want to spend public money on farmland and open space protection.

"We are not an outside group with a secret agenda," explains Rob Steffens, the co-chair and a fourth-generation fruit farmer from Sparta Township. "We simply feel that over the long haul, urban sprawl will destroy the character of Kent County and have huge negative consequences for future generations living here."

SAN DIEGO COUNTY DEPT. OF PLANNING & LAND USE

Usually associated with beaches and the Navy, San Diego County also has the nation's 12th largest county farm economy. Here, cattle graze near avocado trees.

Farmland Conservation Strategies

When all is said and done, veteran planners say there are just three principal ways to protect America's farmland and ensure the economic success of agriculture, the nation's oldest, and among its most stable, diverse, and competitive industries.

The first is to encourage farms and farmers to take advantage of new technology, markets, and opportunity in order to increase their profitability.

The second is to zone farmland to restrict its use to growing food and fiber.

The last is to compensate producers, through tax breaks or grants, to permanently set aside their land for agriculture.

Generally, local jurisdictions interested in safeguarding their farm sectors implement just one of these tactics, possibly two, with mixed success. But a handful of counties across the nation are implementing all three, with remarkable consequences.

The gold standard in farmland conservation in the United States, according to authorities, are Maryland's Montgomery, Howard, and Carroll counties, and Pennsylvania's Lancaster County.

Each established formidable farmland conservation programs that variously:

1. Purchase development rights from farms. Carroll County has permanently secured more than 48,500 acres since it established a farmland preservation program in 1979. The American Farmland Trust counts 60 to 70 similar local farmland preservation programs in 16 states. As of January 2005, such programs collectively spent $761.7 million to preserve 241,181 acres.

2. Transfer development rights from farm areas to growth areas. Montgomery County, north of Washington, DC, has preserved more than 48,000 acres by providing a market mechanism that allows builders to buy development rights from farmers in a designated agricultural protection zone, and use those rights to increase the density of homes in zones the county has designated for growth. The program is the most successful of roughly 50 similar transfer of development rights projects across the country, and has preserved the county's scenic rural beauty in one of the most densely populated metropolitan regions in the nation.

3. Establish and rigorously enforce agricultural zones that generally prohibit more than one home per 20 acres. A township in Lancaster County earlier this year established a standard of one unit for every 50 acres in its agricultural zone, with farmers themselves serving as the most significant constituency in support.

4. Promote farm profitability by providing technical assistance to farmers, developing farm markets and other local food sales and distribution programs, and

Guide to Rural Living

Dust and noise, and the need to operate at odd hours, can lead to confrontations between long-time farmers and new neighbors. A number of counties, particularly in the West, have published brochures, distributed by realtors, to alert new rural residents that they live in an agriculture zone. Boulder County, Colorado, for instance, which has protected more than 70,000 acres of ranch, range, and farmland since the late 1960s, distributes a "Guide to Rural Living" that tells new residents, "If you choose to live among the farms and ranches of the rural countryside, do not expect county government to intervene in the normal day-to-day operations of your agricultural neighbors."

embracing farmland as an essential scenic amenity to recreation, tourism, and the quality of life. Lancaster County's $800 million-a-year farm economy, one of the nation's largest, is buoyed by a farmland preservation program that has permanently set aside over 68,000 acres solely for agriculture. The scenic farmland supports a tourism industry that draws millions of visitors and is valued at well over $1 billion annually.

The West Coast also has supported effective farmland programs. Voters in King County, which surrounds Seattle, established a purchase of development rights program in 1979 that has spent nearly $60 million to protect 12,880 acres of farmland. Marin County, California, north of San Francisco, established a farmland preservation program in 1980 that has protected more than 15,000 acres. Sonoma County, California established a purchase of development rights program in 1990 that has preserved 32,307 acres at a cost of $67.4 million.

Providing Room for Expansion

In San Diego County, which is about the size of Connecticut, one key to farmland preservation efforts is an update to the county's general plan. The update seeks to prompt growing numbers of residents to settle within towns and cities. That would leave more room for the county's expanding and profitable agriculture industry, which has grown 40 percent in a decade and is now valued at $1.5 billion a year, the nation's 12th largest county farm economy.

Roughly four in ten of San Diego County's 2.93 million residents live in the city of San Diego, along a temperate coastal plain. Agriculture is spread across much of the rest of the land, distant enough from San Diego and its suburbs so that most residents don't even know that San Diego County has 5,255 farms – the third largest number of any county in the United States – that earn an average of $5,612 per acre, and contribute $5.1 billion in overall economic activity, according to the California Department of Agriculture.

Still, even as the number of San Diego County farms and land in agriculture increased over the last decade, so too did the number of new residents, by more than 40,000 people annually. As competition for land, water, and space on highways grew, so too did appeals from the county's farm community to help ease the pressure. In May 2005, according to Christine Carta, an environmental planner with San Diego County, the county's elected leaders hired American Farmland Trust to help design the San Diego County Farming Program Plan to "promote viable farming in this region." The county Farm Bureau also is playing a role in supporting the work, which complements the county's general plan update.

"One of the things we're looking at is the potential to establish a purchase of development rights program," says Ms. Carta. "We have the support of the Board of Supervisors who adopted a policy in support of agriculture. It has also been critical to have the Farm Bureau working with us. They see the benefit of finding common ground."

Last fall, the county held a series of public outreach meetings to hear farmers' and residents' concerns for the future of farming in San Diego County, a vital step toward proposing a land conservation plan. "Most people," observes Ms. Carta, "don't realize the significance of farming to the economy of San Diego County. It's our fifth largest industry."

"The county wants to move its future density from the back country to town centers," adds Eric Larson of the Farm Bureau. "What accompanies that is

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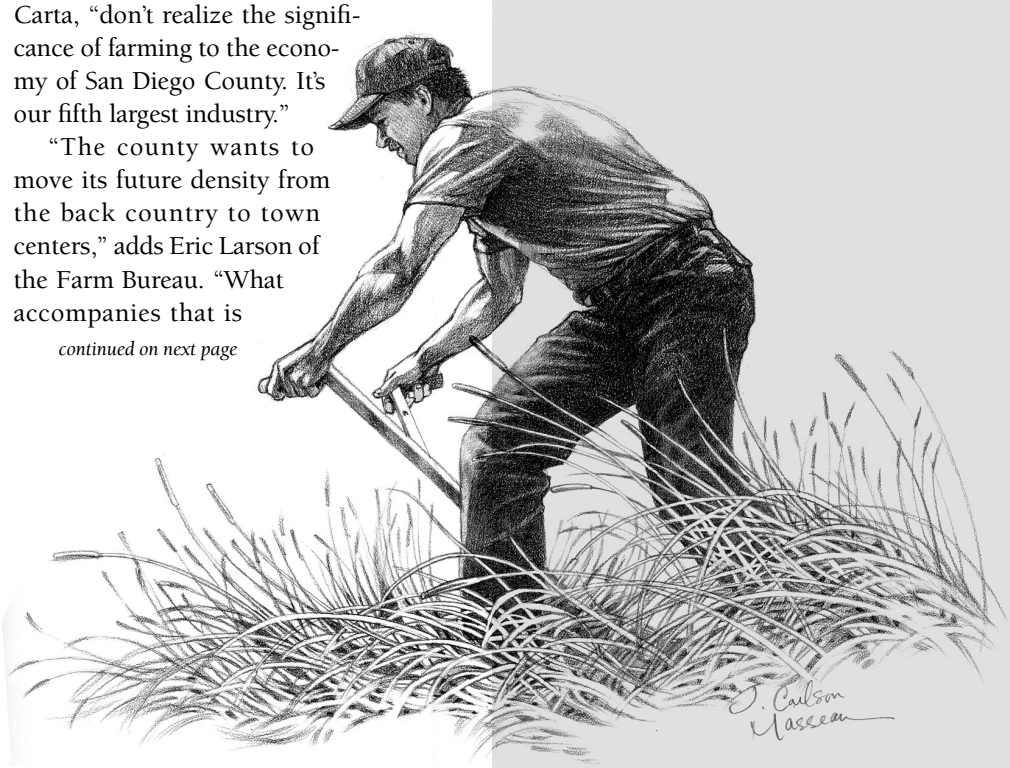

Community Costs

Editor's note: Because of its relevance, we're reprinting below part of a sidebar from Gayle Miller and Douglas Krieger's article on PDRs in our Winter 2004 issue.

Land in purchase of development rights programs will likely be assessed at lower rates since the use of the land is restricted. In most cases, a lower assessed value will reduce property taxes. Indeed, this reduction in property taxes is a large part of what makes PDR programs attractive to farmers.

While the municipality will receive less tax revenue, this needs to be balanced against the substantial cost savings communities experience when farmland and open space is retained. A number of "cost of community services" studies have found that these cost savings often equal or exceed reduced property tax revenue.

The American Farmland Trust is one good source of information about cost of community services studies: <www.farmlandinfo.org>; 1-800-370-4879.

See also Cost of Public Services Study (Duncan Associates for the Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture, 1999); available at: <www.mda.state.mn.us/agdev/public services.htm>.

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down-zoning for farmland and increasing density in town. The value of property, though, is driven by the number of houses you can build on it, not the value of the crop you can grow. With that transfer of population to town centers, we recognize a potential tremendous loss in equity in the value of property to farmers, which could be financially disabling to them. So we came forward with a proposal for a purchase of development rights program. Our members tell us they need to have their equity protected if there is a change in zoning. At the same time, it would do their hearts well for that land to stay in agriculture. If a farmer is given the opportunity to sell his development rights, he remains whole. That's why we support it."

A Growing Interest in Farmland Protection

Four converging factors are propelling efforts to conserve farmland in counties and towns across America: Demographic urgency. Technical capacity. Local leadership. And the value of food and fiber production to regional economies.

In most every farmland conservation program, the urgency is provided by population expansion. The United States is growing faster than at any time in its history and is expected to reach 420 million people by mid-century, according to the Census Bureau. Not only are there more people, according to the government, there also are many more households. The size of American families is shrinking, and living arrangements are much more fluid as society adapts to the new market and cultural conditions of the 21st century.

At the same time, population has continued to disperse, with land consumption for residential development outpacing population growth (so even in metropolitan areas with minimal growth, farmland and open space is being consumed at fairly high rates). The push and pull of demographic change is seen most clearly at the edges of urban regions,

The Economic Engine of Agriculture

It's only recently that the importance of the agriculture industry has attracted significant public attention. The nation's 2.1 million farms account for over $1 trillion in economic activity.[1] But until very recently the supply of farm and ranchland – 938 million acres, nearly half the country – was viewed not necessarily as inexhaustible, but certainly plentiful enough to make any concern about running out seem foolish.

Even the more dire estimates put the annual loss of farmland at around one million acres annually. At that rate it would take 900 years for all of America's farmland to disappear.

But the rush of land development at the urban edge, the speed with which capital and technology can transform a community, turning open spaces into acres of parking lots, is changing the discussion. In many states, farms have emerged in the public mind as critical pieces of the regional economy, and conservators of a quality of life challenged by runaway development.

Michigan is typical in this regard. The state's 50,000 farmers produced more than 200 commodities that generated $4.3 billion in farm gate receipts in 2004, an all-time high. An analysis by the state Department of Agriculture, made public late last year, found that the farm industry's overall contribution to the state's economy – through products, processing, marketing, distribution, and other activities – is over $59 billion annually and accounts for one million jobs. No other industry comes close except for manufacturing.

But even though the agriculture industry is, arguably, the healthiest major industrial sector in the state, its farmland base is eroding. From 1997 to 2002, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, Michigan converted 300,000 acres of farmland to other uses, approximately 60,000 acres annually.

An analysis done in the late 1990s by American Farmland Trust, concluded that five critical agricultural regions in Michigan are imminently threatened by the loss of farmland. Those regions include the fruit belt near Traverse City, which produces more tart cherries than any place in the United States, and the "Fruit Ridge" outside of Grand Rapids, a major producer of apples.

Just three years ago, the steady loss of farmland in Michigan was a top public interest priority. During her successful gubernatorial campaign in 2002, Jennifer M. Granholm said suburban sprawl and the state's eroding land base were two problems she was determined to solve. In 2003, the 26-member Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, a bipartisan commission appointed by the Democratic governor and Republican

MICHIGAN LAND USE INSTITUTE

The grape and wine industry is a fast growing component of the farm economy in a surprising number of states, not just California. According to the Census Bureau, the number of U.S. wineries jumped from 687 in 1997 to 1189 in 2002; grapevine acreage in North America increased by 25 percent during the 1990s. In Michigan, family-owned wineries line the 16-mile long Old Mission Peninsula in Grand Traverse County, as seen in this photo.

legislative leaders, recommended three primary steps to ensure farm profitability and protect farmland.

JEAN CARLSON MASSEAU

First, the council said, Michigan should establish "agricultural production areas," or designated zones, to be used principally for food and fiber production. Second, the council recommended investing public funds in programs that provide farmers with the economic incentive to keep land in agriculture. And last, the council called for a fund to help more farms and related businesses invest in new technology, marketing, and products that would make such operations more profitable.

To their credit, the governor and the Republican-led legislature included $10 million to fund new farm-based enterprises as part of a broader jobs and industry investment package adopted last December. But the council's other two recommendations have languished. One reason is that there simply isn't much money to go around. This year the state Agricultural Preservation Board had just $1.3 million to invest in farmland protection projects. That was enough to protect, perhaps, 1,100 acres.

So the push for farmland conservation has come at the local level. Twenty-three townships in 14 counties, according to the state Agriculture Department, have established legal authority that allows them to purchase development rights to farmland. Six townships in Grand Traverse, Washtenaw, and Kent counties have approved property tax increases that pay for buying development rights from farmers.

where new housing subdivisions and farms collide.[2]

But even as new residents swarm into more countryside homes and businesses, counties, townships, and cities are no longer panicking as they once did. The capacity to establish farmland preservation tools, like purchase of development rights, is more readily available today than ever. The preservation techniques have been proven to work at a fair cost all over the country. Though critics still complain about property rights, taxation, and government intrusion in the market, most programs are funded by a mix of private and public dollars, and farmers are satisfied with the result.

Just as importantly, local planning departments have become more expert and much more comfortable in implementation. And when given a choice, hundreds of referendums have shown that 80 percent of voters support spending a little today on preserving farms in order to save a lot tomorrow in the cost of new development. *Community Costs, p. 5*

The third essential ingredient is local elected leadership. While Democrats and Republicans often engage in vicious partisan battles in state capitals and in Washington, at the local level cooperation between the parties – and between governments and business – are the new norm.

Citizens recognize the pace of the changes, welcome and unwanted, that development is causing in their communities. They expect their elected leaders to respond thoughtfully and with whatever speed government can muster to build the economy and improve the quality of life. The rapid increase in the number of farmland preservation programs, the money invested, and the acres protected reflects local elected leaders' recognition of this political trend.

The last component behind the increased interest in farmland preservation is a recognition of how much agriculture contributes to communities. The nation's two million farms account

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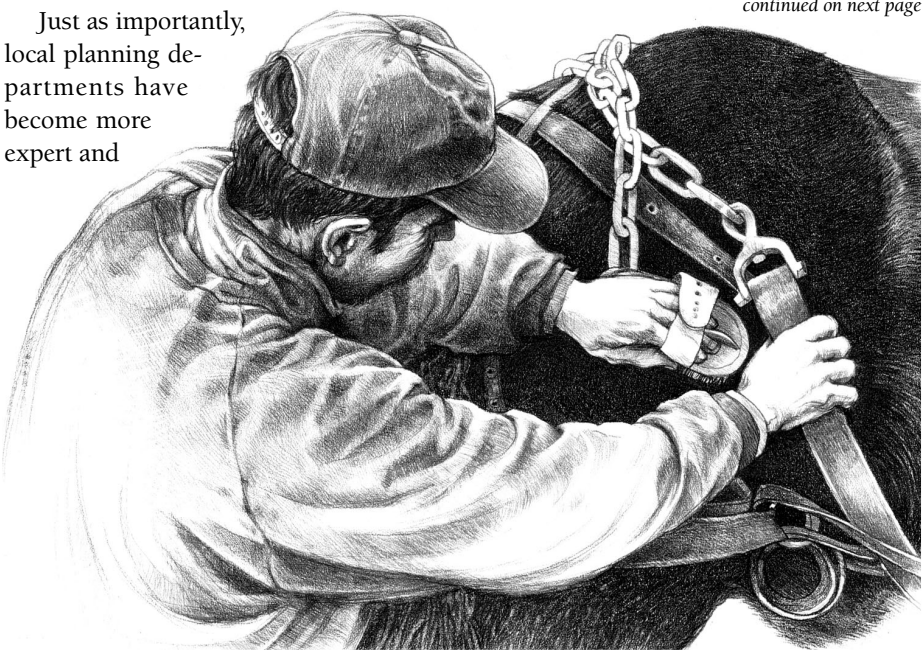

1 The *2002 U.S. Economic Census* provides sales totals for the various sectors of the economy. Over $1.3 trillion in sales comes from agricultural production related sectors, including: food manufacturing; agricultural warehousing; grocery store retailing; restaurants; beverage and tobacco manufacturing; and nursery and garden store retailing. But even viewed more narrowly, the value of direct agricultural sales by farmers is huge: about $235 billion in 2004.

2 While the total amount of cropland nationwide has held steady in recent years, the concern about the loss of farmland often centers on our metropolitan areas where development pressure is most intense, and where farmland is vital to ensuring locally grown food supplies.

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for over $1 trillion in annual economic activity in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. *The Economic Engine of Agriculture, p 6.* Among the nation's largest industrial sectors, agriculture consistently ranks among the most efficient, productive, technologically adept, and internationally competitive. More than that, though, rural residents are partial to farmers, and well they should be.

Protecting farm fields, orchards, rangeland, and pastures from development secures a rural county's recreational, scenic, and quality of life benefits.

Gradually all four of these trends are translating into the growing political will among the electorate and public officials to spend more public money on farmland preservation. Since 2003, Congress has approved $303 million to provide matching grants to states and local governments for farm and ranchland preservation. States, led by Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey, also are spending generously. And local governments are making substantial investments. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, for one, authorized spending $25 million this year for farmland protection.

"It's not hard to figure it out," notes Deborah Bowers, editor of *Farmland Preservation Report*, a respected monthly newsletter. "Constituencies are angry about growth and development, the destruction of landscape, and destruction of a rural way of life.

"Politicians pick up on it," she adds. "They are asked by voters how many people can live here and not completely wreck the agricultural industry. They then start thinking about fiscal realities all the development creates. And that's the clincher. Because if politicians don't spend money to preserve farmland they will need a lot more money for schools, road improvements, police and fire protection. That's when it all comes together for them. They ask planning staffs for information, and there are just many more politicians ready now to use that information and lead."

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Moving Forward

Planners in Pennsylvania, Michigan, California, and elsewhere say that regardless of which way a local government decides to move to protect farmland, nobody is going anywhere unless considerable work is undertaken to educate farmers, the public, business leaders, and elected officials about the risks and benefits of any approach.

"You have to build a consensus in the community," says Jay Hoekstra, of western Michigan's Grand Valley Metro Council. "People have to feel like they've participated in making the decision. And they have to feel completely comfortable with the details."

In Michigan, as in many other states, communities are reluctant to establish new zoning measures to protect farmland. The pressure from property rights groups who threaten legal action over what they view as seizures of private property have proved too great for many township and county boards to overcome.

But pressure from those wanting their towns and counties to take action to preserve farmland has also grown stronger. Armed with information showing the vital role agriculture plays in local and regional economies, and concerns about preserving adequate food supplies, farmers and other residents have asked what can be done to reduce the loss of farmland.

That's one reason why there's been increased focus on comprehensive land planning (as in San Diego County) and on more flexible programs like those providing for the purchase of development right programs.

Back out on 4 Mile Road in Lowell, Michigan, where the woods and fields converge, as they have for all of his 65 years, Lloyd Flanagan offers a more direct reason for investing in the program. "If all this ground gets developed," he said, "there won't be any farmland left in Kent County." ◆

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