

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Save a farm: Live in a town.

Last week, Berks and Montgomery counties announced they will each allocate more than \$1 million toward farmland preservation in 2017. Chester County will allocate more than \$300,000, although it will also put millions of dollars into conservation easements to be held by non-profits rather than farmers.

Typically, funds allocated by counties to preserve farmland are matched with state dollars, which vastly increase their impact.

Pennsylvania is the national leader in farmland preservation through the purchase of development rights, protecting about 5,000 farms and more than 500,000 acres of agricultural land.

Yet this ambitious program, which started nearly 30 years ago and has cost more than \$1.3 billion, protects less than 7 percent of the state's 7.8 million acres of farmland.

Meanwhile, as recent development proposals in the Pottsgroves, Douglass, and New Hanover demonstrate, open space is being lost much faster than it can be saved.

Traditionally, townships try to protect rural areas by requiring minimum lot sizes of two or three acres.

Such zoning encourages sprawl, rather than discouraging it, by allowing a small number of houses to break up and fragment huge amounts of tillable land.

True agricultural zoning, as used in Lancaster and York counties, and a handful of Berks townships, requires a minimum lot size of 20 acres

or a sliding scale that might allow four or five houses on a 100-acre farm, with each house situated on the least productive soils on a lot of no more than an acre.

Even so, the requirement that every municipality must allow for every kind of land use means new development will be scattered all over the landscape instead of concentrated in a few areas where it makes sense.

Most states south and west of Pennsylvania empower counties, not townships, to create and enforce land use laws. This allows counties to zone wide areas for agricultural uses only.

England goes even further. Land development in Britain is a privilege, not a right. Local governments tightly control where it is allowed, and housing densities are typically much higher than here. By placing more people on smaller areas, the English countryside is preserved much better than in America.

No matter what the regulatory system, the greatest threat to farmland is our car culture. As long as people want to live on large housing lots and drive for all their daily activities, farmland will be lost.

It's towns like Pottstown that foster true sustainable development — protecting the environment and open space.

Pottstown has hundreds of homes on small lots in a compact area within walking and biking distance of stores and offices. In the long run, that's the only way to accommodate population growth while conserving farmland.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



ONLY A SMALL PERCENTAGE of Pennsylvania farms are protected by conservation easements.