

Ironically,

ADVERTISEMENT

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

We want it. They don't

Ironic, is it not? Last month, at a joint meeting of Pottstown Council and the school board, PAID director Peggy Lee Clark talked about efforts to bring new development to Pottstown. Meanwhile proposed developments in formerly rural townships surrounding Pottstown bring out residents opposed



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

to more houses and shopping centers.

Exurban residents aspire to live on a large lot in the open countryside and drive over uncongested roads to stores, schools, and workplaces.

Such a dream is possible only when a small number of people try to live it. When substantial numbers move into the countryside, it loses the very qualities – beauty, solitude, tranquility – that make rural life desirable.

And each newcomer says, "I'm here now — let's not allow any more development!"

Particularly shameless residents buy houses overlooking scenic farms and then expect the farmers to maintain the land in agriculture to protect their view. Fie on the farmer who sells out to a developer because rising school taxes and traffic make continued farming economically impossible.

In Pennsylvania, landowners have a right to make a viable economic use of their land. Zoning can restrict that

use to an extent, in the public interest, but not take it away altogether.

That's why the courts allow municipalities to create discrete zones for housing, or stores, or offices. Each zone must still have some economic value.

Townships often try to preserve their rural character by large lot zoning — say 2 to 5 acres per house. Such zoning encourages sprawl, rather than discouraging it, by allowing a small number of houses to break up and fragment tillable land.

Effective agricultural zoning, as opposed to zoning designed to keep commoners at bay, requires 20-acre minimum lots 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.

Such zoning predominates in Lancaster and York counties, which are trying to preserve their agricultural way of life.

But you need a concentration of farms, and strong commitment from farmers, to make effective agricultural zoning feasible. Like any other kind of zoning, it can be changed at any time at the whim of the local governing body.

The most effective way to save open space in our area is to encourage people to live in existing towns. Failing that, the only practical way to protect open space is simply to buy easements from farmers.



LARGE LOT ZONING destroys more open countryside than higher density housing because it only takes a few homes to carve up an entire farm.

EFFECTIVE AGRICULTURAL ZONING can prevent sprawling development by allowing just one dwelling unit per 20 acres, on average. Lancaster and York counties, which take farming seriously, have more effective agricultural zoning than all other Pennsylvania counties combined.

www.pottstowncitizens.org