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It is Possible to Preserve Farming

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It Is Possible to Preserve Farming

By

Howard E. Conklin

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No. 82-12

It Is Possible To Preserve Farming¹

1. I have only a simple message:

We cannot save enough farm land to make any difference to the food supply, but we can save enough farming to have an impact not only on food but on a number of other important things as well. Saving farm land means building fences against suburban growth and nonfarm scatteration. We can't afford fences good enough to hold city people in the city. But we can minimize their damage to farming when they come to rural areas.

2. It is very difficult to prevent the growth of suburban areas or the scatteration of nonfarm people into the countryside.

a) Observations in Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Japan.

1. Strong land use controls.

2. Urban growth and scatteration not much different visually than U.S.

a) Copenhagen to Kronbourg along Katagat, to Frederiksborg, and return.

b) Holland from Amsterdam to The Hague and south.

c) Japan -- the 650 mile run from Tokyo to Fukuoka.

b) Observations in the United States.

1. Hawaii, especially Oahu.

2. Current growth in Pennsylvania west of Philadelphia and in Maryland near Baltimore and Washington.

c) I am strongly impressed by the political skill and perseverance displayed by urban and suburban people who want to live, or create industrial and commercial establishments, in outer metropolitan areas or beyond. They know how to bend the zoning ordinances and any other regulations that stand in their way. It simply is not possible to put tight fences around metropolitan areas.

d) The only fences that will hold are those created by the suburbanites and semi-suburbanites themselves to exclude unwanted uses from their own residential areas. Affluent suburbanites exclude rental properties, public housing, low cost dwellings, industries, and the less attractive commercial establishments. And they make these exclusions stick.

3. Suburbanization, however, never occupies all the terrain it captures, at least not for many years.

a) It is well known that urban growth in many areas of the United States wastes an acre for each one it occupies. Does it have to do this?

b) Observations in Japan (under conditions requiring very complex water management).

¹ Presented at a public seminar on farm land retention in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, 27 Feb. '82.

4. Today, much of our nonfarm growth is well beyond even the outer reaches of the suburbs. It is nonmetropolitan. And its potential for debilitating agriculture is tremendous.
 - a) This growth is the consequence of a quest by people for a home of their own when they cannot afford one in a metropolitan area.
 1. Less expensive homes are possible where there are no land use controls.
 2. Other reductions in living costs are possible as well.
 3. Incomes (above commuting costs, if any) are less, but the lower-cost lifestyle more than counterbalances.
 - b) Nonfarm rural people control rural local government, or take control the first time they get mad.
 1. Margin of 10 to 1 over farmers in New York.
 2. Will not pass ordinances that make themselves nonconforming users and force their children to leave the community.
 3. Local control of land use continues with suburban help.
 - c) The potential for adverse affects on farmers are many:
 1. Increased property taxes, partly by asking for new public services and partly by bidding up the price of land so assessed values rise.
 2. Increased need for renting land rather than owning it, due to high prices, with attendant insecurity of tenure and difficulties in arranging for such improvements as new buildings, orchards, and conservation structures.
 3. Increased regulations on pesticides, odors, noises and appearances.
 4. Increased stealing and vandalism.
 5. Increased dog damage.
 6. Construction of more roads, and gas, sewer, electric and telephone lines that disrupt field layouts, drainage ditches, and tile lines.
5. A mixed land use philosophy is possible that can keep farming strong and at the same time keep the countryside a good place to live for people of modest means.
 - a) There is the beginning of a mixed-use philosophy in planning literature:
 1. Greenbie, Design for Diversity
 2. Procos, Mixed Land Use
 but these books are addressed exclusively to inner city conditions.
 - b) So far in the rural areas ad hoc measures have been most commonly adopted to reduce only some of the points of direct conflict between farm and nonfarm people:
 1. Laws have been passed in most states to prevent taxes from being raised on a farm simply because a nonfarm use locates nearby.
 2. "Right to farm" laws have been passed to protect farmers from the tendencies of encroaching nonfarmers to overregulate farmers.

- c) A few measures are more comprehensive or long-lasting.
1. The agricultural districts law in New York combines tax adjustment on farms with some right-to-farm provisions and a few discouragements to nonfarm settlement in farming areas. This law is designed to encourage a public commitment to farming by farm people and a public expression of support for farming by nonfarm people. It provides the occasion for recognizing the legitimacy of farming in numerous instances where government action might otherwise ignore this activity.
 2. Programs to purchase development rights are under motion in several states of the Northeast and in the state of Washington. These presumably solve an important part of the farm tax problem rather permanently and at the same time provide the farmers who sell with capital they can use for enlarging or intensifying their operations. The purchase of development rights is expensive, however, may lead to increased rather than reduced regulations on farmers, and is likely in the longrun to promote estate farming more effectively than efficient food production. The purchase of development rights does have the advantage of assuring that the areas will not be built upon. They are likely to become museum pieces or estates, but they will remain open.
 3. Michigan's circuit-breaker is a very interesting effort not only to foster food production in a general way but also to facilitate entry into farming by young people. Under it, farmers in effect rent their development rights for a definite period of years to government in return for an assurance that their real estate taxes will not exceed a given percentage of their net income. Renting development rights is less expensive than purchasing and provides for greater longrun flexibility. As a circuit breaker, the law provides greater incentives to young farmers since they usually have higher cash outlays for interest on borrowed capital and for new equipment, and other capital items.
 4. Oregon's effort to keep nonfarm activities off good cropland but not out of farming areas is an interesting experiment in walking the fine line between preserving farm land and preserving farming. States in which their cropland is widely scattered will find Oregon's experiences worth examining, though it appears too early yet to reach firm conclusions.

6. Summary

To talk about saving farm land by controlling farmers is to approach the problem of maintaining food production from the wrong end. It is nonfarmers who convert farm land. And nonfarmers, from affluent suburbanites and semi-suburbanites to low income exurbanites and rural children, are very resourceful in rolling back local zoning ordinances or keeping them from being passed in the first place. State zoning might be effective but established suburbanites do not want state zoning lest the state require public housing in the suburbs.

It is only the preservation of farming that is politically feasible. It has been demonstrated in many countries that it is possible to keep the lands not yet occupied by nonfarm uses in efficient agriculture. Actions appropriate to this end include farm tax adjustments, right-to-farm laws, agricultural districts, purchase of development rights, Michigan's circuit breaker, and Oregon's effort to keep nonfarm people off good cropland though not out of farming areas.

Nationwide, the most important programs to promote plentiful food production will, of course, be those that assure adequate farm credit, provide effective agricultural research and education, assist farmers in preventing soil erosion and in maintaining appropriate soil moisture control, promote worldwide markets, and maintain a strong and well balanced economy.