

WINTER 2019

Hourglass Quarterly



JOBS, EDUCATION & POVERTY

VANISHING MIDDLE CLASS

NEW URBANISTS' EXCEPTION

FARM PRESERVATION

FARM PRESERVATION THOUGHTS

There is strength in numbers

Farm preservation done right is an effective means of protecting community character from haphazard development and ensuring a successful agricultural industry. One problem arising years after a farm is preserved is the development around the farm causing cries for the use of eminent domain to change its status.



According to Tom Daniels, a land use and environmental planner, determining which farms should be preserved is very important. Ideally, preserved farms should be grouped in blocks of at least 500 acres to avoid preserved farms from ending up as islands in a sea of asphalt. Grouping farms together in large, contiguous blocks allows farming to thrive.

“It gives farms some sense of certainty in their operations that they can invest in a chicken operation, they can put up a new dairy barn, and they’re not going to have neighbors complaining about their operations and trying to take them to court.”

Preservation entities generally use a point system to rank applicants. Pennsylvania mandates

that 40 percent of the points be allocated to soil quality. Daniels would rather see greater emphasis on proximity to other preserved farms. Point systems generally favor large farms over small ones, but can be adjusted based on land use priorities. Preserving farms far from town can make preservation dollars go further.

Lancaster County — home to the most preserved farmland of any county in the U.S. — still has a fair amount of preserved land in scattered parcels. But it has also created some large, contiguous blocks. The number of preserved farmland blocks larger than 1,000 acres increased from nine in 2007 to 17 in 2016. Five big ag counties in southeastern Pennsylvania, including Lancaster, and another five in central Maryland have preserved a total of 600,000 acres. That’s one-tenth of the preserved ag land in the whole country. Almost all of these easements are perpetual, and they are much harder to overturn than agricultural zoning designations.

Lancaster County heavily employs agricultural zoning, and is the only county in the state using urban growth areas, which aims to protect farmland by channeling population growth into designated areas. Through farmland preservation and support from government and the private sector, it’s possible to have a strong agricultural industry for many years to come. **H**

Edited from a November 9, 2018 article by Phil Gruber in Lancaster Farming.