

# **PRESERVING FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE IN WASHTENAW COUNTY**

## **FACT SHEET**

**Background:** For the last 15 years, farmland in Washtenaw County has been converted to other uses, primarily residential, at a rate of 4,000 acres a year. This rate of conversion is having a negative impact on the county's diverse agricultural industry, which ranks 18<sup>th</sup> for counties in Michigan and generates \$200-300 million of annual economic activity. At the current rate of loss, agriculture as an industry will cease to exist within three decades. Figures are not available for loss of fragile lands (wetlands, wildlife habitat and woods) but those landscape features are disappearing as well.

Most of the development that replaces farmland is large-lot, detached, single family homes in planned and unplanned subdivisions in what has been commonly referred to as SPRAWL. Sprawl development is auto-dependent, land-consumptive and degrading to the environment. Studies have shown that when a watershed of any size has more than 15% impervious surfaces (roads, roofs, parking lots and yes even lawns), the chemical, physical and biological quality of the surface waters drops off dramatically. Restoring it would likely be prohibitively expensive, so prevention (as always) is the more cost-effective option.

**The Call for Change:** In July, 1996, a group of citizens approached the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners and advocated the county establish a purchase of development rights (PDR) program for farmland. PDR—also known as purchasing agricultural conservation easements—has been in effect for over 20 years, preserving over 450,000 acres in 16 states. The program uses public funds to compensate owners of qualified land for the value associated with the ability to build houses but keeps the land in private ownership, on the tax rolls and, in virtually all cases, in agricultural use. The programs are voluntary; farmers nominate their land and are evaluated for productive and scenic values, threat of development and natural features. Those who score highest are approached to sell their rights, an appraiser determines the value of those rights, a contract is signed and recorded to restrict use of the property and a payment is made to the landowner.

The County Board's Agricultural Lands and Open Space Task Force studied the issues and made a set of recommendations in December, 1997. Among those recommendations was for a property tax levy of 0.4 mills to purchase conservation easements and acquire fragile lands outright. The funding generated by that millage amount would protect 1,000 acres of farmland and open space directly and draw matching funds to protect as much as another 1,000 acres every year, while costing the average county household about \$26. The County Board is now assessing whether to put this proposal before the voters in November, 1998.

Protecting land now is an investment in everyone's future. The program will preserve our clean watersheds and varied landscape for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will give us the tools to do the job right. In ten years open space will be at a premium in Washtenaw County. Let's look back then and be glad we protected farmland and open space now.

### **Key Points:**

- Focus the program on farmland preservation, which will have the biggest long-term impact
- Define where dollars will go up front so the public knows what its voting on
- We can pay a little now and preserve that which is beautiful and unique about Washtenaw County, or we can pay a lot forever to subsidize poorly planned SPRAWL development
- Public support for preserving open space has been shown in numerous surveys; let the citizens decide the issue in November of this year when voter turnout will be high

For more information, contact Barry Lonik (734) 426-3669, <BLonik13@aol.com>.