



Farming at the Urban Edge

Preservation of farmland despite pressure from development and making farming profitable are not the only challenges facing farmers today. The location of the Prince George's County's farmland near the rapidly growing Washington, D.C., metropolitan area also presents both challenges and opportunities. Despite the county growth management and farmland protection efforts, fragmented suburbanization is becoming inevitable, even in the Rural Tier. In addition to already developed subdivisions, recorded plats are awaiting implementation. Agriculture in Prince George's County is therefore regarded as farming at the urban edge.

A growing number of America's farms are operating at the urban edge. Eighty six percent of U.S. fruits and vegetables and 63 percent of dairy products are produced in urban-influenced areas.¹¹ Farms in metropolitan areas are generally smaller, produce more per acre, have more diverse enterprises, and are more focused on high-value production than nonmetropolitan farms.¹² The dynamic forces of urbanization allow a variety of farm types to coexist. There are recreational farms where the owners follow both farm and nonfarm pursuits, adaptive farms that have accommodated their operation to the urban environment, and a residual group of traditional farms that are trying to survive in the face of urbanization. Adaptive farms are the most likely to survive as farms.¹³

The coexistence of urban and rural land uses and the interaction of farming and nonfarming communities have both negative and positive consequences for agriculture. Although adapting to this environment is very challenging, proximity to urban areas may present certain benefits.



¹¹ American Farmland Trust, *Farming on the Edge: Sprawling Development Threatens America's Best Farmland*, 2002.

¹² Heimlich and Anderson, *ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Challenges of Farming at the Urban Edge

1. The high cost and availability of land for sale or lease makes it difficult for farmers to expand their operations. As a result, farms are forced to intensify their operations in order to survive on smaller parcels.
2. Property taxes may rise as land values increase.
3. Conflicts can arise between farmers and new neighbors due to a lack of understanding of basic farm practices by urban dwellers. Farmers are forced to contend with nuisance complaints about noise, hours of operation, odor, dust, manure handling, pesticide use, and slow-moving farm equipment on the roads.
4. Declining agricultural support businesses, including farm input suppliers and machinery dealers, make it difficult and costly for the farmers to operate.
5. Safety on rural roads is a major concern. Moving farm equipment on roads congested by commuters is dangerous and expensive.
6. Trespassing, vandalism, theft, and urban smog may decrease crop yields and increase farm expenses.

Benefits of Farming at the Urban Edge

1. Demand is increasing for locally grown fresh vegetables and fruits among urbanites as they adopt healthier eating habits. Both farmers and city dwellers benefit from being close to each other.
2. Direct marketing opportunities for farmers to restaurants, gourmet grocery stores, and urban households through farmers' markets, U-pick operations, or CSAs.
3. Opportunities for farmers to grow high-value ethnic and specialty crops that are in demand by a diverse urban population.
4. Cultural exchange and social interaction between farming and nonfarming communities may lead to a better understanding and appreciation of agriculture.
5. Increased agritourism and value-added agriculture opportunities for farmers.
6. Proximity to urban centers may provide a larger pool of seasonal or part-time farm labor.¹⁴
7. Off-farm employment opportunities for the farmer to support farm income are greater.¹⁵
8. Proximity of farms provides part-time farming opportunities for urbanites who are interested in starting recreational farms that may eventually develop into full-time or retirement businesses.¹⁶
9. Recreational and educational opportunities at nearby farms for urban and suburban residents enhance their quality of life.
10. Environmental features such as wetlands and wildlife habitats remain accessible to urban and suburban residents.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Recommendations

As the Census of Agriculture data demonstrates, farmland is dwindling and agriculture is rapidly disappearing in Prince George's County. However, there is still a significant amount of farmland that can be preserved along with prime opportunities to make agriculture a more profitable industry. To protect farmland or agriculture will require a holistic approach and a combination of many strategies that may transform agriculture. Following are some recommendations to transform agriculture into a viable industry in the county.

Promoting Agriculture as an Economic Development Tool

Promotion of agriculture as an economic development tool is key to maintaining agriculture as a viable economic activity. For this to occur, the county must recognize agriculture as an important market niche and place renewed emphasis in supporting the industry. Given that food is in high demand in this rapidly growing metro area and that locally grown produce is preferred by many consumers, the potential for the county to capture this demand is considerable. The Economic Development Corporation could work with farmers, retailers, and consumers to promote agriculture.

The county, together with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service, Prince George's County Farm Bureau, Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission, and other appropriate agencies and organizations, should develop policies and implementation tools to promote agriculture. Certain campaigns such as "eat local" could be initiated to encourage residents to purchase locally grown produce. The county should educate the public about the importance and availability of local agriculture and encourage them to appreciate it. Additional education is needed for newcomers to rural areas about farm practices and the right-to-farm law to avoid conflicts with farmers.

Educating and Organizing Farmers

Traditional farmers and new farm entrepreneurs alike need education to be successful in growing alternative crops. The Farm Bureau, Cooperative Extension Service, Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission, Maryland Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other agencies and nonprofit organizations related to agriculture are already offering a variety of educational workshops. However, better coordination and outreach are needed to get more farmers and the public involved.

Perhaps small business education is as important as agricultural education. In order for the farmer to be successful, he or she first needs to be a business owner. Having a business plan is a must to operate a profitable farm enterprise. Labor management is another important topic for the farmers to learn. Recruiting and keeping good laborers require more than luck.

Farmers need to get organized and act together to promote agriculture, protect their rights, and market their crops. Learning new marketing techniques is especially important for the success of farming. The county should consider establishing a task force to help farmers who want to farm in a nontraditional environment and encourage them in this new endeavor.

Marketing

Direct marketing is the key for profitable farming. The county could assist farmers in various ways, including establishing a cooperative and a processing center. An indoor farmers' market that operates year round could be an attraction to bring people to the county from around the metropolitan area. The county could assist in exploring possible locations and coordinate with farmers to establish such a market.

Promoting Agritourism

The Prince George's Convention and Visitors Bureau should take the lead and work together with The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and other appropriate agencies to promote agritourism. A more holistic look at agritourism, heritage tourism, and historic preservation may broaden tourism opportunities in the county. As described above, there are several opportunities and the county may help in various ways, such as developing a program to preserve historic barns and finding adaptive reuses for them.

Farm Labor Development

One of the complaints of farmers is that they are often unable to find qualified farm labor. Prince George's County Public Schools and Workforce Services should get involved in agricultural education. Establishment of a vocational high school or track specializing in agriculture may not only solve this problem but also create an alternative to those seeking a new area of interest. Promoting agriculture among youth is a good investment for the future of agriculture. Workforce Services should work with the farming community to identify and train future farm laborers.

Agriculture-Friendly Regulations

The Zoning Ordinance should be reviewed and necessary changes made to create a friendlier environment for a variety of agricultural operations. Including agritourism or processing facilities for value-added products as permitted uses are examples for possible amendments. The idea of establishing a new zoning category, "agriculture zone," should also be considered.

Other code and regulation amendments should be considered if they might help agriculture to flourish without burden. For example, the county should consider limiting liabilities at farm-related operations such as on-farm bed and breakfast establishments and exempting the amusement tax from agritourism. In addition, the

Health Department regulations should be reviewed for possible changes to allow value-added production, such as jams, on farms without requiring a commercial kitchen facility.

Although the State of Maryland has a right-to-farm law, most counties prefer to have a stricter local law to protect farmers. It may also be an option for Prince George's County to consider additional regulations along these lines.

Farmland Preservation

Although Prince George's County exhibited limited participation in state farmland preservation programs in the past, it is making strides to better address the area of farmland preservation. The county should seriously consider initiating a comprehensive farmland preservation program and encourage farmers to participate in the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation program.

In order to promote farmland preservation, the county should establish a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. TDR is a planning tool to preserve sensitive areas, such as farmland, by redirecting development potential to more suitable areas. TDR programs provide an effective method for local governments to reduce development pressures in preservation areas and encourage development activities in growth areas. Therefore, TDR is an excellent technique to implement the county's general plan. Landowners, developers, and the general public all benefit from TDR:

- Landowners may sell their development rights while retaining ownership of the property and continuing farming.
- Developers use the development rights they purchase from rural areas to build additional density in growth areas, which results in higher profits.
- The general public enjoys the preserved natural resources and open space and appreciates the public expenditure savings on otherwise needed public facilities and services to accommodate suburban sprawl.

The county should work together with the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) to accept and approve a TDR program to better utilize the Agricultural Transfer Tax.

Where farmland cannot be preserved through TDR or other land preservation programs, the Rural Conservation Subdivision concept should be encouraged as opposed to large-lot development. The county should pass legislation to make the implementation of this already-approved concept possible.