
PROJECT MEMORANDUM



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Huntingdon County Comprehensive Plan Update DM/A Project No. 05-183

TO: Comprehensive Plan Committee

FROM: DM/A Planning Group

DATE: April 3, 2006

RE: Agricultural Preservation Policy

Several of the amendments to the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) in 2000 through the passage of Act 67 and Act 68 impact the manner in which municipalities regulate agricultural operations. First, the amended MPC contains additional requirements for county governing bodies when creating and implementing comprehensive plans. The county must now consider agricultural land in their comprehensive plans and must develop plans that preserve and enhance prime agricultural lands. Counties must also ensure that land use regulations be compatible with existing agricultural operations.

Second, the MPC now contains requirements for municipalities when developing and adopting zoning ordinances. These ordinances must now "...encourage the development and continuing viability of agricultural operations." The legislation forbids municipalities from discouraging the expansion of agricultural operations in areas where agriculture has traditionally been present, unless the health or welfare of the public is endangered.

Agriculture must be considered and promoted by governing bodies at both the county and local level when undertaking any significant planning activity. Even if found not to be feasible in a particular jurisdiction, the governing body must indicate that agriculture as a land use has been considered.

The future land use component of the current county comprehensive plan indicates that areas designated as agriculture should be protected from land use conflicts which would devalue them from their current use and prevent them from being able to continue. To achieve this, the comprehensive plan update will include an Agricultural Preservation Policy to provide an approach to supporting agricultural production; protecting agricultural lands from incompatible land uses; and increasing agricultural income and farm-related employment opportunities by creating conditions that further the county's agricultural industry.

In coordination with municipalities, some of the key approaches, or policies to achieve the Plan's vision for agricultural areas could include:

- Support farmland preservation
- Reduce impacts of scattered development
- Adoption of agricultural zoning that limits the number and size of subdivisions and non-agricultural development.

- Limiting the extension of utilities into agricultural areas to instances necessary for health and safety, with design controls to prevent further expansion to serve new development
- Liberal accessory use regulations that specifically include farm occupations, roadside stands and other rural pursuits, provided that these uses have little impact and that adequate provision is made for the safe disposal of wastes;
- Ensure that the farming community has a voice in civic decision-making
- Explore the creation of an agricultural development strategy
- Explore innovation land use programs that promote preservation while permitting appropriate development

In addition to the preservation and protection of agricultural areas, the Plan's Agricultural Preservation Policy will need to address the changes in agriculture that can potentially have an impact on the surrounding community. Traditionally, farming has involved the growing of crops for either sale off of the farm or for consumption by animals on the farm with the subsequent marketing of either meat or milk. Thus, the viability of the farming operation was very much tied to the productivity of the land. Recent years have seen the advent of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). These involve the concentration of large numbers of cows, hogs or poultry on a single tract of land with the feed being bought off-site. Because the food these animals eat is often not grown on the tract of land where they are housed, very high animal concentration can be achieved. These highly concentrated operations often create acute odor impacts on neighboring residents. These odors can arise from the animals themselves, but more often from their waste products, both at the site where produced and where they are land-applied.

To manage these issues, some of the key approaches, or policies to achieve the Plan's vision for agricultural areas could include:

- Separate provisions of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that ensure proper siting, operation and disposal of wastes; and
- An Agricultural Nuisance Disclaimer that informs prospective residents of the potential impacts associated with normal farming practices that are protected under the PA Right to Farm Law.

The need to prepare an Agricultural Preservation Policy and the content of such a Policy will be discussed in more detail with the Comprehensive Plan Committee at the meeting scheduled for April 20, 2006. DM/A will need additional input from the Committee regarding preservation of agricultural areas of the county, the retention of agricultural operations and issues surrounding current Huntingdon County initiatives to preserve agricultural areas.