

PERSPECTIVES

Farmland: A resource that should be treated with care

Early last month more than 80 people gathered at McHenry County College in Crystal Lake to share their thoughts about the future of the region's remaining farmland.

The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) hosted the meeting to gain information directly from people who are living in rural areas and along the urban-rural periphery of the metropolitan region.

The ensuing dialogue is helping our agency (NIPC) to create a reasonable goal for farmland in its regional planning process known as "Common Ground."

ALAN MAMOSER

guest columnist

NIPC brought the discussion to McHenry County because this still half-rural county presents all of the issues facing urban area farmland. Here the transition from urban to rural is clearly seen on a southwest-to-northwest trajectory.

The landscape gradually changes from a thickening suburban zone, where new subdivisions fill the spaces between the old town centers, to a transition zone where farmland is breaking up into scattered pieces, to the very rural townships of the western sector.

The meeting brought together farmers, local mayors, developers, and business people. Several county board members attended the meeting as well.

The county Farm Bureau was instrumental in bringing out farmers, who are too often not in attendance when public discussion of land use issues occurs. A few were from farms held in their families for five and six generations.

No definitive farmland goals resulted. However, participants showed considerable consensus on what important farmland-related topics need to continue in the dialogue.

A general feeling arose that farmland is a valuable resource that should be treated with care and conserved in a context that upholds its value and ensures protection of property rights.

Participants met in small groups around separate tables, shifting from small group conversation to

roomwide interaction throughout the evening. They read and discussed the 50 goals of Common Ground presented by NIPC staff. They then concentrated on the farmland goal.

Currently, the Common Ground goal for farmland is: "Productive farmland will remain in the regional landscape, providing opportunity for farmers and farm products, which contribute value

tronic keypads, each person could vote on an idea's importance on a scale of zero to 10.

A majority of participants in the room identified a few issues as "very important" or "absolutely necessary" for further consideration and planning.

Among the important topics coming to the fore were the following:

- Lack of a countywide policy to protect farmland — a basic lack of creative policy for farmland;
- "Spot zoning" and incompatible land uses;
- Approval of development on prime soils rather than substandard soils;
- Absentee landowners with only short-term interests;
- Low commodity prices making farming less viable;
- Lack of access to local markets and farmers losing value to market middlemen; and
- The need to recognize the value of prime farmland for future generations.

Clearly, the participants demonstrated their in-depth understanding of the complex forces impacting the value of farmland in a large metropolitan area today.

NIPC learned about people's aspirations for the land and about the issues of common concern where fruitful dialogue may begin. All of

this will go into shaping goals and strategies of a new comprehensive plan.

NIPC will return to McHenry County this summer to continue the dialogue by focusing on workable strategies for farmland.

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to the region's residents and economy. Preservation of prime farmland and environmentally sound agriculture practices will contribute to the protection of the region's soil and water resources and to sustainable development patterns in rural and suburban communities."

In a final round, groups shared their insights on what critical issues touch upon farmland in McHenry County.

These issues were shared with the whole room and, in a unique session called "instant survey building," participants identified the most important ones requiring further dialogue. Using elec-