

# Illinois Issues

A publication of the University of Illinois at Springfield

October 2000

Volume XXVI, No. 10



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Credits: Art Director Diana Nelson photographed and designed this month's cover.

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*Illinois Issues* is published by the University of Illinois at Springfield. In addition to university support and subscription income, the magazine is supported by grants and donations. The contents of the magazine do not necessarily reflect the views of the university or the donors.



## AT THE CITY'S EDGES

*Should the current form and pace of development continue, all farmland may be gone from the Chicago metropolitan area by 2050. But by opening a regionwide dialogue on the future of farmland, we might achieve a valuable blend of land uses for the future*

by Alan P. Mammoser

For many residents of the Chicago metropolitan region, farm ground seems an undifferentiated run of corn and beans stretching from the edges of suburbia to Des Moines and beyond, little more than a useful way to hold land before development. Yet many local planners, and some farmers, are beginning to assert an equal value in maintaining that land for agriculture. Such differing perspectives may make it difficult to talk about preserving farm acreage at the city's edges. Whatever our point of view, though, we must agree it's a huge amount of land, and how it's used will have a tremendous impact on the region's future. With so much at stake, we should consider making farmland a prominent part of a broader discussion on land use in the region.

A broader discussion will necessarily encompass near-term policies to make farming and suburban residential life more compatible, policies that touch upon zoning methods and property tax structures. But the longer-term issue of land value will necessarily emerge at the center of the dialogue on farmland.

About one-third of the land that comprises the six counties of the Chicago metropolitan area is still farmed, according to a land use inventory performed by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. Population increase and consequent expansion will leave about one-fourth of the land in agriculture in 2020, some 1,000 square miles, mostly in the outlying counties of Will, Kane and

McHenry. But should the current form and pace of development continue, all farmland may be gone from the region by 2050.

There is as yet no consensus on what should occur with this land. Thus, we might ask ourselves what that 1,000 square miles should look like in 2020, or what it should look like for our children in 2050. Should a low-density spread of auto-dependent, separated land uses, so-called "sprawl," widen in a ring around the metropolis and push farmland outward yet another 10 or 20 miles? Or should the people of the expanding urban region implement management to preserve some land in farms? By opening a regionwide dialogue on the future of farmland, we might achieve a valuable blend of land uses in the metropolitan area.

First, of course, a key economic reality must be addressed. Illinoisans who are concerned about keeping farmland as farmland may find the quantity of land consumption alarming. Nevertheless, the land market on the suburban fringe reflects the inherent development value of farmland: In the current market, a commercial or residential developer will pay more than 10 times what a farmer will pay for land.

New and creative approaches by planners and farmers already are achieving some success at raising the economic value of land in agriculture, thereby holding large areas of prime farmland intact. These efforts seek to exploit the multifaceted social value of farmland, as land for growing food

and flowers, as land with recreational potential, as scenic open space, as a way to maintain the region's hydrological balance. If awareness of these many real and potential values should rise, then a broad-based consensus might be built to further efforts to protect farmland. It might be possible to conceive of residential development in coexistence with agriculture.

There are mixed emotions and some tensions on the urban fringe. Farmers continue to sell their land, normally at a very good price, and the region's residents tend to concur that this remains fully within their rights as landowners. Some farmers, however, want to stay on their land, and for the long term. Their deep feeling for the land is expressed in the words of Bruce Werner, a farmer who works the prime soil of Will County. "You can grow grain on about one-third of the U.S., that's all, and once the land is gone, it's gone forever." He's incensed at the paving of prime cropland, with little regard to the fertility of the soil. "They're taking the best of the best," he says. He doesn't mean the best in Will County, or in the state, but some of the best in the world.

Joel and Linnea Kooistra, who operate a dairy farm in McHenry County, are determined to stay. They, like many other farmers in McHenry, have deep roots. Some families go back four or five generations. They are leaders in their communities. To sell their land is to give up, not just farming in McHenry County, but a whole way of life. This helps explain why



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***Farmers should play a highly visible role in a regional dialogue on future land uses.***

residents in the still-rural areas of McHenry are forming township planning commissions, gaining limited ability to thwart the county's power to change zoning to nonagricultural uses.

Linnea is hopeful about the possibilities of achieving coexistence with the expanding urban area. "We will be here in 20 years. Farming will change in McHenry County, but it will remain in some form," she says. She sees some farm families in McHenry turning to alternative high-value crops for the urban market, enabling them to gain higher profits per acre. Families that farm 1,000 acres of corn and beans, for example, might dedicate 40 of those acres to fruits and vegetables and open a farmstand.

Tom Halat is one farmer who made a successful transition to more intensive land use for retail farm marketing. His 240 acres on the edge of Huntley in rapidly growing southeast McHenry County are now enclosed by subdivisions. Compelled to change his operation, he moved the family's grain farming westward and expanded his planting of orchards, vegetables and flowers. He sells from his store on Algonquin Road, directly to local residents, responding to a growing demand in the marketplace for fresh locally grown food.

Some county planners want peaceful coexistence, too, because they want to protect farmland as an economic asset. And they want growth to occur in an expected progression from urban areas outward, preventing the premature "leap" of development into agricultural areas.

Kane County planners may have advanced this effort furthest with a comprehensive plan that lays out the county in three parallel bands: an urbanized zone in the older settled areas nearest the Fox River, then a transition zone of newer growing communities, with agriculture protected in the large western portion. They are proceeding with consideration of purchase of development rights from farmers to ensure that land is kept in agriculture. For now, however, the plan largely relies upon intergovernmental agreements for implementation. Sam Santell, a county planner, acknowledges that some municipal annexations will lead to development out in the agricultural areas. Nevertheless, he says, "cooperation with the municipalities has gone well, and this is critical because agriculture is such an important part of the county's economy."

Agriculture does indeed form an important part of the economy in the region's rural areas. The value of farm products sold topped \$340 million from more than 1,200 farms in the three counties, according to the 1997 agricultural census, the most recent available. Farms have an average property value of well over \$1 million each, making up an irreplaceable part of the tax base of the rural counties while requiring far less in the way of services than residential areas. Still, there remains a strong tendency to see agriculture as a temporary land use, especially in a market where commercial or residential uses command much higher prices.

Farmers should play a highly visible role in a regional dialogue on future land uses. However, when other regional residents are called upon to discuss the value of farmland, they might ask, "What can farmland do for us?" Then the multifaceted value of farmland must be discussed.

They might consider the nutritional value of this land close to the urban core. Farmers in the region are now growing all sorts of things, not just grain for the world market, but crops for the urban market on their doorstep: fruits, pumpkins, Christmas trees, vegetables of every kind, herbs,

flowers and sod. The Illinois Farm Bureau lists 85 community farm markets in the metropolitan region, all operated by local producers. Consumers' desire to buy fresh produce directly from the land, to see where their food is coming from, is increasing and will most likely create a growing demand in future years.

Further, there is a growing recognition of the educational and recreational value of farms near the city. The many apple orchards open for picking in the fall have long brought these aspects of farm life to regional residents.

And these are just a few of many potential values that must be taken into account in an informed discussion on farmland. In fact, new ideas already are being developed to integrate farmland into suburbia. Perhaps the most advanced effort is Prairie Crossing in suburban Lake County. In that development, 150 acres of agricultural land forms a farmstead and supplies a produce market. A family that lives in the development runs the farm. That farm is considered valued open space for homeowners who like to see vistas. But it is something more: The land is worked, providing produce and recreation. If nothing else, Prairie Crossing will provoke discussion and suggest possibilities for the future integration of agriculture with other land uses.

Clearly, there are changes afoot in the region, changes that suggest new ways for suburban dwellers to coexist with farmers, and to gain value from that proximity. In this sense, the current efforts of planners and farmers to protect some farmland now are invaluable, as they will allow time for dialogue to emerge on new and creative uses of the land. And new uses may bring about the rise in farmland value that will be required for its long-term protection.

Farmland, for now the cheapest land, must be an important part of the emerging dialogue on the uses of land resources in the metropolitan region. □

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