Owen J. Furuseth

"If We Are Really Serious About Protecting Agricultural Land In North Carolina. . ."

The need to protect agricultural land is one of the most common themes in contemporary land use planning. Throughout the 1970s, planners, agriculturalists, and environmentalists joined together in a chorus warning of an enormous shift of farmland in the United States. The alarming estimates of farmland losses, and their consequences has prompted widespread public concern. In response, government action toward a goal of protecting prime agricultural land has been extensive. By 1978 forty-seven states and numerous local governments had adopted some type of policy aimed at protecting agricultural operations which have been under pressure for development (Conroy, 1978: 10). At the federal level, specific legislation to preserve farmland has not been passed; however, a number of agencies have adopted administrative procedures with language requiring the preservation of valuable agricultural acreage (Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, 1975; Council on Environmental Quality, 1976; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1978; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1978).

While the protection of agricultural lands is most often presented as axiomatic (and perhaps this is valid), there are a variety of reasons for protecting this resource. In the American Society of Planning Officials (ASPO) Planning Advisory Service Report, *Saving Farms and Farmlands: A Community Guide*, Toner suggests ten distinctive public purposes served by preservation of farms and farmlands (Toner, 1979: 3-4). These benefits include conserving energy, preventing urban sprawl, maintaining open space, protection of natural systems and processes, controlling public costs, preserving the local economic base, promoting local self-sufficiency, preserving rural lifestyle, maintaining specialty crops, and maintaining agricultural reserves.

To most citizens, however, the issue surrounding the protection of agricultural land revolve around two concerns: finite agricultural resources and protection of local open space. The viability of local agriculture is perceived as a type of insurance for adequate food supplies in the future, while simultaneously providing greenbelt benefits. The larger questions of economic and energy efficiency remain secondary in the public's mind.

While a number of strategies have been suggested for protecting agricultural resources, a review of the implemented programs shows a surprising lack of variety. Most states have opted for simple indirect measures that reduce farmland losses by first protecting the farmer. The technique with the widest application has been the differential property tax assessment for farmland. Currently, forty-three states have adopted this mechanism to protect agricultural land. The underlying assumption of differential assessment is that farmland should be taxed at use value, rather than market value. The premise being that the higher ad valorem tax rate creates a cash flow problem for farmers and thus forces decisions to either get out of farming or move their operations to areas with lower property taxes. While the differential assessment policy has proven politically acceptable to both farm and non-farm interests, its effectiveness at protecting agricultural acreage is nevertheless questionable. An increasing number of *ex post* studies have shown that differential tax assessment programs, at best, do not prevent agricultural land from shifting into other uses, but may only postpone such shifts

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(Coughlin, et al., 1977; Gamble, et al., 1977; Gustafson and Wallace, 1975; Keene, et al., 1976; Vogeler, 1976). Therefore, farmland losses will continue. Consequently, planners and policy-makers are faced with the dilemma of continuing an ineffective, but acceptable policy or finding a new strategy to protect agricultural land uses.

AGRICULTURAL LAND CONVERSION IN NORTH CAROLINA

Over the past three decades North Carolina has undergone rapid change, moving from a rural, agricultural based economy to an increasingly urban, industrial society (Table 1). The effects of this change have had enormous impacts on agricultural land use. As in other parts of this country, population and economic expansion have created new demand for developable land. Whether voluntarily or by coercion, agricultural operators in North Carolina are forced into competition with land development interests. As pressure for buildable land increases, land values increase in excess of farm values. Nearby urban activities, may also generate spillover effects which further impede normal farming operations. In response to the potential financial gain, as well as the uncertainty and nuisances of farming there is an accelerating rate of land conversion. That farmland which is not developed is then subjected to increasing pressure. An "impermanence syndrome" may occur in the sense that farm operators curtail investments, revert to less capital intensive operations, or idle their acreage (Berry, 1978). The end result, which can be observed throughout North Carolina, is increasing amounts of agricultural land transformed to urban, vacant, or less intensive agricultural use (i.e. shifting from cropping to pasture).

Agricultural census data confirms the popular notion that North Carolina's agricultural resources are rapidly declining. The North Carolina *Conservation Needs Inventory* (N.C. Inventory Committee, 1971) examined land use patterns between 1958 and 1967. The Inventory found that the amount of "urban and built-up" areas increased by 662,000 acres during the study period. The represented an 82.7 percent increase, much of which came at the expense of agricultural land use. More recent data examining agricultural land use, published in the 1974 *Census of Agriculture*, show a continuing downward trend in agricultural land use (See Table 2). Between 1969 and 1974, North Carolina lost almost one quarter of its farm operations and one eighth of the agricultural acreage in the state. While some of these losses are accounted for by agricultural consolidation and the retirement of marginal land, the major portion represents the permanent loss of prime land to urbanization.

A more detailed examination of the *Census of Agriculture* shows that agricultural losses were only slightly higher in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) of the state (Table 3). One might hypothesize that farmland losses would be significantly greater in urban areas; however, this was not the case. These data imply that agricultural land losses are a serious problem, not restricted to any particular section or type of county in North Carolina, but rather statewide. While the visual evidence of farmland losses may be more observable in the most heavily urbanized counties, the incremental transfer of agricultural land in rural and exurban areas is only slightly less.

TABLE 1

NORTH CAROLINA POPULATION CHANGE

(1950 - 1970)

	1950	1960	1970
North Carolina Population	4,061,929	4,556,155	5,082,059
(percent increase)	-	12.2	11.5
Urban population (percent)	33.7	39.5	45.0
Rural, farm (percent)	33.9	17.7	7.3
Rural, non-farm (percent)	32.4	42.8	47.7

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

TABLE 2

FARMS AND AGRICULTURAL LAND USE IN NORTH CAROLINA

	1959	1964	1969	1974
Total Number of Farms	190,567	148,205	119,386	91,280
(percent change)		-22.2	-19.4	-23.5
Land in Farms	15,887,724	14,381,500	12,733,751	11,243,933
(percent change)		-9.4	-11.4	-11.6
Average Farm Size (acres)	83.	97.	107.	123.
Proportion of N.C. in Farms (percent)	50.6	45.8	40.8	36.0

Source: North Carolina Census of Agriculture, 1974.

DIFFERENTIAL TAX ASSESSMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA

At the present time, public action to protect agricultural resources in North Carolina is centered around the Preferential Property Tax Amendments (N.C.G.S. 105-277.1 *et seq.*) enacted by the legislature in 1973. Further clarifying amendments were added in 1975. Under these revisions in the State Taxation Statute, qualifying agricultural, forestry, and horticultural lands may be taxed on the basis of present use value rather than market value. The higher market value assessment is based on the potential highest and best use of land, rather than current value.

Eligibility for enrollment in the program is dependent on meeting qualifying requirements. These requirements involve such matters as land use, acreage, ownership, income, and sound land management. Under the existing regulations, agricultural land includes farm operations which grow crops, plants, or animals, as well as woodlands and "wasteland" which are part of the farm unit. The definition for forest land and horticultural land is, however, more restrictive. Only the acres actively used for commercial production qualify for inclusion in the program.

An additional test for all three categories is that commercial agricultural activities be carried out "under a sound management program." The North Carolina Department of Revenue defines a sound management program as "a program of production designed to obtain the greatest net return from the land consistent with its conservation and long-term improvement" (N.C. Department of Revenue, 1975: 20).

Some additional stipulations aimed at including only active commercial farms in the program are the acreage size and income requirements. In order to qualify, agricultural and horticultural land must comprise at least ten acres per tract and have average gross earnings of at least $1,000 for the preceding three years immediately prior to application. Government payments can be included in the income calculations. Forest land has no minimum income requirement, however, the size requirements increase to 20 or more acres per tract in order to qualify for the tax benefits. Both income and size provisions are universal components in differential tax programs designed to filter out "hobby farmers" and non-agricultural speculators from qualifying for large tax savings.

A final qualifier for use value assessment relates to farm ownership. Qualifying agricultural land must be "individually owned." Individual ownership may include natural persons or a corporation whose owners (or spouses or siblings) are actively engaged in agricultural production activities. Additionally, an individual owner's principal residence must be on the agricultural land or the agricultural land must have been owned by the owner or his family for the four years preceding application. Corporate owned agricultural land must have been in the possession of the corporation or a principal shareholder for a similar four year period. The intent of the ownership requirement is to restrict enrollment in the program to traditional farming operators. As in other states, the North Carolina program was not designed to provide property tax relief to corporations or real estate firms, whose interest in agriculture is limited or short term.

For agricultural property owners meeting

TABLE 3

LAND USE CHANGE: SMSA COUNTIES AND NON-SMSA COUNTIES

	1964	1974	Percent Change
Land in Farms in North Carolina SMSA Counties (Acres)	2,269,378	1,710,274	-24.6%
Land In Farms in North Carolina Non-SMSA Counties (Acres)	12,112,122	9,533,659	-21.2%
Proportion of Land In Farms in North Carolina SMSA Counties (Percent)	43.2	32.7	
Proportion of Land in Farms in North Carolina Non-SMSA Counties (Percent)	46.9	37.0	

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1974.

the eligibility requirements, admission into the program is voluntary and simple. Following the approval of the application by the local tax office, the agricultural acreage is taxed on the basis of its use value. Concurrently, the regular ad valorem taxes for the property are calculated and maintained by the tax office. The difference between the two figures represents the deferred taxes for the property.

A roll-back provision specifies that if the agricultural property (or any portion of the parcel) changes to a nonqualifying use, or if the property is sold to persons outside the immediate family, the land loses its eligibility. Under the roll-back requirement, the owner is liable for the deferred taxes for the preceding three years, plus an interest penalty on the deferred taxes. The penalty is calculated at two percent for the first month plus .75 percent for each additional month in the program, up to three years. The intent of the roll-back and interest penalty is to reduce the economic advantage of enrolling in the program and subsequently withdrawing when land values become attractive. Studies of differential tax assessment note that without roll-back mechanisms there is no way to police speculators from enjoying short-term tax advantages or capturing lost revenue when land is withdrawn from the program (Keene et al., 1976: 66-79).

Finally, enrolled property owners whose land no longer meets the differential taxation requirement are required to notify the local tax office. Failure to disclose a disqualification results in an additional penalty of ten percent of the deferred tax and interest.

EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR CURRENT POLICY

An evaluation of North Carolina's differential assessment program begins with consideration of the objectives of the program. As in other states, the primary purposes of this effort are to provide property tax relief to agricultural operations as real estate market values rise, and to encourage the retention of agricultural land uses. Consequently, an examination of the success of North Carolina's differential taxation must include measurement of the degree of participation and tax savings by farm operators, as well as the impact of the program at reducing agricultural land conversion.

With the assistance of the Ad Valorem Tax Division of the North Carolina Department of Revenue, Pasour and Neuman have undertaken extensive analysis of participation in the program and the fiscal impacts of the program since its implementation. The findings of their studies show that enrollment rates vary substantially from county to county, however, statewide the total number of farmers in the program is quite small (Neuman and Pasour, 1979). Five years after the inception of the program (1973-1978), 42 counties lacked any qualifying farmland in the program, while one county (Wake County) accounted for 34.5 percent of all the farm tracts receiving lower taxes. Statewide, Neuman and Pasour report that 12,599 tracts were enrolled in 1978. The tax savings to property owners were estimated to be $2,274,413 in that year. Approximately 47

percent of this total savings was in Wake County.

The early experience with differential taxation reveals that the present policy has not enlisted widespread participation and provides only marginal financial benefits to farm operators. Recognizing this failure, Neuman and Pasour (1979) propose that the number of tracts qualifying for deferred taxation will increase as revaluation of the tax base in each county updates both the market and use value of farmland. However, a review of the 20 counties which underwent revaluations in 1977 and 1978 demonstrates that this has not been the case to date. Some counties have experienced enormous increases in participation (e.g. Davie, Alexander, Alamance, and Randolph), but other counties continued to have minor or no increase in enrollment following revaluation (e.g. Gates, Wilkes, Craven, Granville).

While it is highly probable that the number of participants qualifying for differential taxation will continue to increase, it can be suggested that North Carolina farm operators are not currently enthusiastic program beneficiaries. Whether through misinformation or lack of adequate rewards, the enrollment of land for deferred property tax is low. Accordingly, the program can be viewed as only marginally successful.

There is public recognition of the need to preserve agricultural resources and protect open space. Photo courtesy of USDA-Soil Conservation Service

As to the effectiveness of the tax program for protecting agricultural acreage, the data are incomplete. Unfortunately, aggregate statewide data of farmland change and dynamics are not available at this time. The 1979 *Census of Agriculture* will remedy this situation. The upcoming census will provide us with an excellent data source for examining the relative impact of the current program since beginning operation in 1974. Until the census data are published in 1980, what is available are scattered reports from planning agencies and county soil and water conservation districts.

Specific disucssions with soil conservationists and planners in Wake and Mecklenburg counties suggest that differential taxation has had only a negligible impact at reducing farmland conversion in these areas. In Wake County, where almost one half of the tracts receiving lower taxes are located,a county planner involved in protecting agricultural lands suggested only minimal effectiveness (Gurley, 1979). In Mecklenburg County, the District [Soil] Conservationist, Albert Coffey, and the Supervisors of the Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District have stated that the rate of agricultural land transformation in the county has actually increased during the past five years. Differential taxation is not perceived as having any significant impact in Mecklenburg County.

The inference that differential assessment policies in North Carolina are not protecting agricultural acreage is supported by findings from other areas. The weight of evidence from states adopting differential taxation is that they do not provide protection for agricultural resources. A 1976 report, *Untaxing Open Space*, prepared for the Council on Environmental Quality, studied the effectiveness of use value taxation in 42 states (including North Carolina). The report's conclusion included the following assessment.

> With respect to the goal of retarding the conversion of farm and other open land, differential assessment is marginally effective and its cost in terms of tax expenditures in high, in most cases so high as to render it an undesirable tool for achieving this goal ... if the owner is indifferent ... or is actively looking for an opportunity to sell to a developer, the tax saving from differential assessment will not have much effect in deterring him from selling (Keene et al., 1976: 115).

SOME ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding discussion of North Carolina's differential taxation program outlines the failure of the current efforts to involve large numbers of agricultural operators in a program which would reduce the cost of farming and,

at least temporarily, slow farmland conversion. We, therefore, find ourselves without an effective program to protect agricultural resources. The seriousness of this issue demands that remedial actions and long range policies be formulated and implemented now.

In light of these conclusions, and after a review and analysis of agricultural land protection programs in other parts of the United States, same suggestions can be made for developing an effective farmland protection strategy. These recommendations are not designed to be exhaustive, but rather simply to be a starting point for local planners and policy-makers discussing how to protect agricultural resources in their community. Hopefully, the broad issues raised will be of insight to planners and decision-makers throughout the state.

IMPROVED DEFINITION OF PRIME OR VALUABLE AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

At the present time, most policy makers are content to define high value (i.e. prime) agricultural land based solely on physical or income generating criteria. In the vast majority of cases, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service's (SCS) Soil Capability Classification system is adopted as the delineator. This system is an interpretive classification system which uses soil and climatic data to place delineated soil areas into groups based on similar management options. Soils are assigned to categories I through VIII, with Class I having no limitation to cultivation.

Typically, the system is used to define and delineate critical agricultural lands. These areas are then noted on a map and become the object of special protection. For those lands in Capability Classes not included in the prime category, their continued use as agriculture does not warrant planning protection.

The problem with adopting this strategy is twofold. First, the Soil Capability Class system is only a crude measure of potential agricultural productivities. The intent of SCS in developing this measure was to provide a gross indicator of potential agricultural

"... DIFFERENTIAL TAXATION HAS HAD ONLY A NEGLIBIBLE IMPACT AT REDUCING FARMLAND CONVERSION ..."

usage. Unfortunately, the power of this system as a predictor of agricultural productivity, and, therefore, agricultural value, has been seized by planners looking for a tool which is both readily available and technically sound. Rather than being a guide, the Soil Capability Classification has become an inflexible standard, which can exclude important agricultural resources from protection. For example, the steep sloped, rocky hillsides of the North Carolina mountains are categorized as having low agricultural potential and would not be considered as

"THE SOIL CAPABILITY CLASSIFICATION IS INHERENTLY INSENSITIVE TO THE NEEDS OF SPECIALIZED OR UNIQUE CROPS."

important agricultural resources using a Soil Capability system, yet they are a valuable resource for growing commercial Christmas trees. The Soil Capability Classification is inherently insensitive to the needs of specialized or unique agricultural crops.

A second problem with relying on Soil Capability Classes to define valued agricultural lands is its narrow focus on physical soil properties. The value of land for agricultural use requires consideration of a number of contextual factors, as well as soil characteristics. The determination of critical agricultural resources must include variables which will effect the efficiency of agricultural land use at any specific location. Among the factors overlooked by soil type identification schemes are critical mass and ownership patterns. Is there a sufficient quantity of agricultural land owned by a limited number of individuals to make farming economically feasible? Is there adequate agricultural infrastructure to meet the service needs of commercial farm operators? An equally important question is the impact of previous public policy and planning actions. For example, have policy precedents, especially capital investment decisions, promoted urbanization in an area now deemed valuable for continued agricultural use?

In defining those areas which should be protected, planners must employ strategies that recognize agricultural land use as one component of a total countywide or regional land use system. The identification of valuable farmland must consider the efficient operation of the total system. A program to protect agricultural resources cannot supercede private and public sector plans already approved or implemented which call for urbanization or the idling of farmland.

It may be suggested that in defining critical agricultural resources, a system incorporating both physical and contextual factors is an admirable model. The use of Soil Capability Classifications as a starting point, tempered by the requirements of specialized and unique agricultural production, may be used to define the resource base. These data may then be corroborated with earlier public policy actions and the characteristics of existing farming operations. The integration of these data sets will permit the

Soil Capability classifications are used to define prime agricultural land.
Photo courtesy of USDA-Soil Conservation Service

delineation of economically and physically viable agricultural resources which may be reasonably protected.

EXPANDED MECHANISMS FOR PROTECTING AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Our present strategy for reducing the conversion of agricultural land is essentially dependent on limited financial benefits to encourage continued farming. The use of property tax relief for protecting farmland is an effective starting point, however, it must be joined with other more direct measures. The evidence, from North Carolina and other areas, shows that singular and indirect mechanisms for controlling farmland conversion do not work. What is required is a broadly based set of planning controls and policies, which would be supported by indirect financial incentives. Ideally, this package would be locally developed and implemented.

The discussion of potentially promising techniques for protecting farmlands has included a variety of innovative ideas, such as the transfer of development rights; fee simple purchase, with subsequent lease back, and development rights acquisition. While these strategies may have merit for protecting farmland, they remain largely untested. Moreover, our limited experience and experimentation has raised several serious questions. The most serious flaw appears to be high operating costs, compounded by questionable results. For example, in Suffolk County, New York a program to purchase the development rights of farmland on Long Island was initiated in 1974. In Phase I, the cost of purchasing development rights for only 3,883 acres was $21 million (Coughlin, et al., 1977: 149). Similarly, a pilot program in Burlington County, New Jersey, calls for the purchase of "development easements" using state monies. As of June 1, 1977, offers on 12,000 acres of farm and woodland had been received, at a price totaling approximately $35 million (Coughlin, et al., 1977: 162). In both cases, the costs of operating a comparable program, either county or statewide in North Carolina would be economically and politically prohibitive.

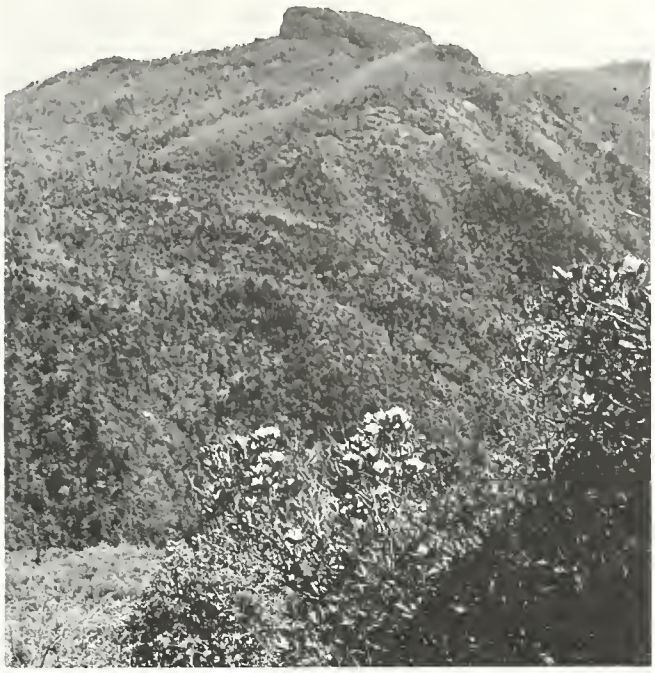
There are, however, a variety of traditional and non-traditional land use controls and policies which are potentially more viable protectors of farmland. Among the mechanisms which have been implemented with promising results by local governments are exclusive farm use (EFU) zoning, restrictive utility extension policies, and urban growth boundaries.

The exclusive farm use zone has been widely employed in California, Oregon, and parts of the Midwest. The two key components of the EFU zone are: (1) a limited number of permitted uses, typically restricted to agricultural or agriculturally related activities, and (2) large minimum parcel sizes for new subdivisions. It should be noted, that EFU zoning is not traditional large lot zoning, under which agriculture is a transitional land use activity. Rather EFU zoning contains stringent standards pertaining to those uses permitted outright and conditionally, and supports these findings with additional restrictions, especially minimum lot size. In Tulare County, California, for example, the minimum parcel sizes range from 20 to 80 acres (Tulare County Planning Department, 1975). While in Lane and Benton Counties, Oregon, the minimum lot size requirement is 40 acres.

Other mechanisms which also have demonstrated utility for protecting agricultural land include selective public utility expansion and urban growth boundaries. Both techniques involve the denial of urban infrastructure to areas which have been designated for protection. The impact

"... PROGRAMS FOR PROTECTING FARMLAND MUST INCLUDE MANDATORY ELEMENTS."

of withholding services and facilities is to make urban development economically unattractive. These techniques have been shown to be highly effective when combined with EFU zoning and differential tax assessments as a comprehensive program for protecting agricultural resources. Two early adopters of this strategy are New York and Oregon (Bryant and Conklin, 1976; Furuseth, 1980).



Agricultural, forestry, and horticultural lands may be included under the Preferential Property Tax Amemdments, Photo courtesy of N.C. Dept. of Natural & Economic Resources

Finally, it should be remembered that a basic requirement for the application of any tool or technique to control agricultural land conversion is an accepted public policy to do so. All efforts to protect farmland must be premised on an articulated and adopted statement of community support. Accordingly, policy documents and plans must be initiated or amended to formally recognize and accept the goal of protecting agricultural resources. In this regard, the general land use plan is a requisite starting point for developing an effective program.

MANDATORY PROTECTION FOR CRITICAL AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

There is a popular adage among agricultural extension personnel that if you scratch the dirt off of any farmer you will find a land speculator underneath. Regardless of the validity of this statement, is is obvious that our present differential taxation program is extremely one-sided. Under the present system, agriculturalists voluntarily participating in the program are given a set of financial benefits, with little or no costs. They may remain in the program receiving a reduction of taxes, until they wish to withdraw. The penalty at withdrawal is minimal especially when measured against the potential capital gains from the sale of developable land. It is not difficult to see why this type of program is viewed as a limited measure, at best, for protecting farmland.

In order to be effective, programs for protecting farmland must include mandatory elements. Those programs which allow voluntary participation or easy withdrawal are flawed. They permit speculators to incrementally destroy programs by participating only so long as it is financially attractive. It is not surprising that public confidence and support of program objectives wanes quickly. A mandatory program would eliminate speculation, while assuring the public of program longevity.

The key to implementing a mandatory program is fairness to agricultural land owners. This may be accomplished by insuring that costs of mandatory farmland protection is balanced by a reasonably attractive set of benefits. In return for maintaining agricultural land use, farmland owners must be compensated with financial and other incentives. This is necessary to insure that agriculturalists are not the "winners or losers" in a farmland protection effort, but rather that all affected parties share the costs of the program.

INCREASED COORDINATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS TOWARD A GOAL OF PROTECTING FARMLAND

A final recommendation revolves around the requirement for increased communication and coordination between local governments and numerous state and federal agencies. If

"ALL EFFORTS TO PROTECT FARMLAND MUST BE PREMISED ON AN ARTICULATED AND ADOPTED STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT."

locally based measures to retain farmland are to succeed, then growth stimulating policies and expenditures by other levels of government must accommodate local policies. The independent actions of the Farmers Home Administration, Division of Highways, or city government may have the impact of negating a countywide program to protect agricultural resources.

While the A-95 review process was designed to remedy intergovernmental conflict, it is not a panacea. All too often coordination between governmental units is paid "lip service," but not much else. Nevertheless, increased discussions and coordination between different levels of government are necessary for a more broadly based and effective program for reducing farmland losses. If the actions taken by other governmental units reenforce local programs, then the work of local planners

and policy-makers to implement agricultural land policies would be more successful. State and federal agencies, and neighboring governments must become partners in protecting farmland.

CAN FARMLAND PROTECTION BE IMPLEMENTED

Of equal importance to the selection of a sound strategy for protecting farmland is the feasibility of implementation. It would make no sense to develop a planning program which is methodologically sound, if it is not politically feasible. Certainly, what has been developed in New York state or San Francisco Bay area to protect agricultural resources may not be readily adaptable in Mecklenburg or Carteret County, North Carolina.

As planners, we all know that effective program implementation requires a widespread awareness and perception of need by the public. Fortunately, available data strongly suggest that among North Carolinians there is an interest and concern in protecting valuable agricultural resources.

Christenson's (1975) statewide survey of public attitudes toward planning and land use decision-making showed strong support throughout North Carolina for local planning and the protection of natural resources. When asked how they wanted land to be utilized in the future, 55 percent expressed a desire for more agricultural land use. The preference for more agriculture was larger than the choice for any other category of land use (Christenson, 1976: 16-17). Not surprisingly, when the respondents were asked if good agricultural land should be preserved from urban development, the overwhelming majority, 64 percent, answered affirmatively while only 22 percent disagreed.

More recent surveys completed in Wilson County and Mecklenburg County show an even stronger measure of local public support for protecting agricultural resources. In an attempt to obtain public attitudes of various land use issues, the North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service conducted a mail survey of Wilson County residents in 1976 (Stone, et al., 1976). A review of the survey findings shows overwhelming public endorsement for the goals of protecting valuable farmland, and strong backing for a variety of measures to implement this objective (See Table 4). One significant exception to this pattern was an obvious lack of support for purchasing the development rights of agricultural acreage.

A detailed analysis of the Wilson County survey data revealed that support for farmland preservation varied with geography and demographics. For example, respondents living on farms were stronger supporters of protecting farmland (85 percent favored), than were urban respondents (73 percent favored). Among the respondents in age groups over 40 protection of farmland was favored by over 80 percent. However, among those in the 18 to 29 age group, support dropped to 68 percent. A larger number of this latter group were in the undecided category on this issue.

The most recent public survey of attitudes toward agricultural resources was carried out by the Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District in 1978 (Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District, 1978). The results of the mail survey, partially presented in Table 4, showed even stronger support than was evident in Wilson County. As in Wilson County, a majority of the Mecklenburg respondents favored protecting the good agricultural land in the county. When questioned about specific tools to protect farmland, the majority of those surveyed endorsed a variety of approaches. There was, however, extensive sentiment against the purchase of development rights. Unfortunately, no demographic or background information is available from the Mecklenburg Survey.

The survey results from these two dissimilar counties, as well as the statewide findings provide evidence of continuing public support for protecting agricultural resources. We, as planners, must therefore not be timid in developing and presenting comprehensive programs to protect some of our most critical resources.

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TABLE 4

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD PROTECTING AGRICULTURAL LAND: WILSON COUNTY (1976) AND MECKLENBURG COUNTY (1978)

	Wilson County*		Mecklenburg County*	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Something needs to be done to help protect good agricultural land from spreading non-farm development ...	78%	10%	83%	8%
Location of residential development needs to be guided in order to keep the best farmland in agriculture ...	83	9	89	6
Only the least productive agricultural land should be developed for non-farm purposes ...	-	-	74	12
Good farmland needs to be protected from residential development even if such protection reduces the value of the land ...	61	20	65	21
Farmers need to be legally protected from complaints concerning odors, noise, and dust arising from normal farm operations ...	53	25	64	19
Tax money should be used to purchase the legal right to develop land from property owners where it is desirable to maintain open space ...	17	57	45	40
Water and sewer lines should not be extended into prime agricultural areas ...	42	29	66	19
If farmland is committed to remain in production, then property taxes should be assessed on its agricultural value rather than its value in other uses ...	71	10	93	2
If property owners are given lower taxes in agricultural land then the county should have the right to restrict development of the land ...	-	-	54	31

*A "no response" category was available to respondents. The sum of agree, disagree, and no response total 100 percent.

Sources: Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District. 1978. Stone, 1976.

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