

[Reformatted copy from LWVL-DC Voter, March 1999]

SAVE OUR FARMLAND=SAVE OUR CITIES.

Background for the March 11 consensus units follows. For more background, see these issues of the Voter: Feb. '98, pp.5-8; Apr. '98, pp. 5-7; May '98, pp. 7-10.

In unit meetings in the spring of 1998, the League study committee on Planning in Unincorporated Areas of Douglas County presented background information on current settlement patterns in Douglas County, the costs and problems resulting from this sprawl, and our analysis of why it is occurring. One striking bit of information from last year's study was the disparity between the widely-held perception that Douglas County is primarily a "residential" county, and what actually seems to be the case--that there is still active agriculture and remaining prime farmland worth preserving in Douglas County.

This past year the committee tried to answer the question of whether we should modify our local Land Use Position to include agricultural land and land use: i.e, whether there are positive reasons for preserving farmland and farming in Douglas County.

Besides reading background material and gathering data, we met twice with Mr. Clyde Mermis and his associates in the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) and attended a seminar at Burr Oak Woods in Blue Springs, MO on "Urban Development and Farmland Preservation" on January 15.

Three participants in the Burr Oak Seminar contributed most to our study: Kevin Schmidt represented the American Farmland Trust; Tom Johnson from the University of Missouri at Columbia spoke on agricultural economics and rural economic development; and Ron McLinden, a practicing and teaching urban planner and Sierra Club member from Kansas City, provided an environmental and global perspective on loss of farmland, including natural areas and rural open space.

The speaker from the American Farmland Trust outlined the great national importance and value of our agricultural lands and farm industry, the incredibly rapid loss of prime agricultural lands to urban sprawl and rural non-farm development, and methods to address the problem. His views reflected The American Farmland Trust's emphasis on purchase of development rights through farmland conservation easements. The Trust also supports other methods for preserving farmland at all levels of government--preferential taxation, enabling legislation, regulation, and market-driven options such as substituting transferrable development rights in place of land in real estate transactions. All these are detailed in the Trust's recently published *Saving American Farmland; What Works*. (The Committee read the book this Fall.)

The most interesting point made by the last two speakers--the economist and the urban planner--was that the problems of cities and rural areas are inseparable. Our national settlement patterns are the principal causes of our loss of farmland and rural open space. Because the supply side of rural land is perceived by many to be unlimited, the demand side has to be addressed. Sprawl, whether from ballooning suburbs or widely-dispersed non-farm residential development, results because the true costs of sprawl are not paid by those who contribute to it. The economist pointed out that, in the absence of normal market forces acting to control sprawl, non-market and market-like mechanisms have to be employed to reverse the trends. In other words, farmers are

going to have to accept regulation if they want to preserve their farms and farmlands. The trick is to get it right. “The wrong approach will save the wrong land.”

Nationwide there are five basic reasons to save farmland:

1. To sustain economic opportunity. (16% of our GDP and 18% of our national employment is dependent on agriculture.)
2. To ensure food security. (We should never allow ourselves to become dependent on imported food, but some of our most productive areas are being lost. For various reasons it is important that metropolitan areas preserve and encourage nearby agricultural production.)
3. To protect our natural resources. (Once lost, it’s gone forever.)
4. To support communities and community infrastructure. (Economy, social fabric, tax base, and community fiscal health are all dependent on growth paying for itself.)
5. To sustain our quality of life. (A clean, aesthetically pleasing, convenient, functional environment is what most of us seek. “Growth reinforces urban amenities, but growth compromises rural amenities. Sprawl can destroy what it seeks to capture.”)

Our interview with Clyde Mermis, Jonathan Alley, and the NRCS soil scientist from Topeka, Bob Plinsky, centered specifically on the value of agricultural land and farming in Douglas County. Last year we learned from Agricultural Extension Agent Gary Keeler that the long term trend on numbers of farms and farmers in Douglas County was down while the county rural population was up. This year, world market conditions and bumper crops created farm product surpluses that reduced prices below costs, creating a crisis for smaller farmers. Douglas County was not excepted. We had heard various opinions, frequently voiced, to the effect that (a) there is very little prime farmland in Douglas County (so why save it?), (b) there are too many farms in Douglas County as evidenced by the crop surpluses (so why save the farms?), and (c) Douglas County is already a residential county (so why try to save anything?)

Therefore, we asked our NRCS interviewees three basic questions:

1. Of what importance is it to Douglas County to preserve its agricultural land, especially in view of current surpluses?
2. Of what importance is it to Douglas County to preserve its agricultural land use; that is, active farms?
3. How much prime farmland is there in Douglas County and where is it located?

Our greatest surprise was to learn from Bob Plinsky that 55% of land in Douglas County is classified as prime agricultural soils,¹ based on Department of Agriculture classifications. Our soils, especially in the Kaw Valley bottomland, are among the best in the world. Our rainfall and availability of surface water make our area less vulnerable than western Kansas, and to lose our soil would be to lose a precious, irreplaceable resource, regardless of whether we need it now.

On the issue of placing value on active farms in Douglas County, taxes generated is only one aspect of value, but it is economic and measurable. From the Douglas County Appraisers’ Office we found that the total appraised value of farmland in 1998 was \$26,098,255. National surveys (through American Farmland Trust) show that county costs in services required by

¹This amount is different from that generated by the GIS map which is closer to 50%. However, this still represents a significant amount of prime agricultural land outside of the Kaw Valley bottomland.

farmland and open space generally is only 35 to 60¢ for every \$1.00 in tax revenues they generate, producing a net gain for counties. In contrast, residential use in counties costs \$1.11 to \$1.60 in services for every \$1.00 in taxes generated.

Both the NRCS and the Burr Oak speakers emphasized that the problems for farmers here in Kansas, including Douglas County, is one of marketing. New value-added products for common crops are being investigated, so that the current surpluses may be temporary. The future may require that more produce be grown locally, especially organically, and local markets may present opportunities for truck farming and other crops. The climate and weather would support this.

Regarding the last question, where in Douglas County the prime farmland is located, we have more maps. The one we wanted most—mapping prime farmland—is being prepared for us by the NRCS. With luck it will be ready in time for the units on March 11. Be surprised along with us!

---Planning in Unincorporated Areas of Douglas County study committee: marci francisco, chair; Betty Lichtwardt; Nancy Shontz; Eleanor and Byron Wenger; Bev Worster.