

Pennsylvania Farmland Preservation Association



Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
Informational hearing
Lancaster Farm and Home Center
Tuesday, September 6, 2005

Our Association appreciates your invitation to participate again on the ground level of discussion as you formulate a menu-of-options for landowners to preserve our farmland and revitalize our farming businesses throughout Pennsylvania.

We must preserve our most important resources and heritage in Pennsylvania, our farmers, our viable farmland and our prime farmland soils. Together, we can make a significant positive difference in not only the future of farming in Pennsylvania but also insure the health of our future residents and their children's children.

House Bill 629 – printer's number 702: The Garden Plot

I like to think our aim is to support the preservation of **Viable** farmland. Recently, our Association by an overwhelming majority voted against proposed State changes to using State funds to ease farms having less than 50 (non-adjacent) acres. Please refer to my past comments to the Senate addressing a previous Bill (671 of 2003).

Hidden within this seemingly innocent Bill that attempts to insure consistency between the law, regulations and county plans is another attempt to lower the minimum acceptable acreage for the preservation of farmland and endorse the use of State funds to purchase easements on what many consider as non-viable land.

I can't see watering down the program to achieve a **Garden Plot**.

Other Solutions:

The State could begin a seriously funded open space preservation program to address more metro small 'farm' areas.

The State could beef up those small 'farm' enterprises with additional economic incentives to continue their businesses.

Just don't call it Agricultural Land Preservation.

Take a look at our easement waiting list for the State: How many farms are waiting that are over 50 acres? Over 2,000? How many more haven't applied yet because of the lack of sufficient funds?

The last time large supplemental funds to preserve farmland were distributed, additional applicants applied in droves. Some counties doubled their waiting lists with applications. Let's stick to the State's present priority and criteria to preserve viably sized farms with State monies. There are methods available to counties to fill in any holes, in preserved areas or preserve smaller 'farms' set off from the farming community, with the use of county funds. Even though funds are earmarked for the use of any county, that money is still State funds as exemplified by the State's real property interest in an easement and the expenditure of those funds should follow the State's present 50 acre determination of viable farm size.

This is, as I have testified before, a slippery slope, to a garden plot policy.

Caveat:

I don't have a problem with allowing counties to accept \$1.00 bargain sales, County only, and paying for the costs to place the easement using the State funds they receive; no matter what the size.

Senate Bill 723 – printer's number 1026 Non-profit partners:

Outstanding proposed legislation! The only thing I can think of is to incorporate a response to the trend of the Federal farmland preservation initiatives. Over the last few years, the USDA has emphasized other amenities that may appear on potential eased farmland. One example of this is historically significant sites where the USDA ranks our applications for federal funds as more significant if this type of amenity is present.

For example we recently closed on a farm easement that also happened to be a bicentennial farm and a notable Pennsylvania site for the Underground Railway. My point is that without changing easement selection criteria, other non-profits may wish to help purchase easements on farms if there is an amenity on the farm that their group can support, e.g. historic and cultural preservation, environmental quality, endangered flora and fauna, floodplain, wetlands and riparian preservation, etc.

This Bill should be moved forward.

Senate Bill 252 – printer's number 249 Inheritance Tax \$1.00 on eased farmland

What can I say...This is a Great Idea!

The Realty Transfer Tax initiative:

1. Other than preserving the County fee for collecting the tax, the State should also consider inquiring among municipalities and school districts whether directing the other local 1% to the preservation of farmland is feasible, leaving a portion available for local administration of the

easement program. Possibly a trade-off or funding source replacement for these two entities would make this idea more palatable.

2. This Bill Sounds Great and should be moved forward!

Other Musings:

The State should consider teaming up with other Federal (EPA, FEMA) and State agencies (PEMA, PHMC, DCNR) to see if it would be possible to use other funds, earmarked for addressing different agency goals, for farmland preservation easement purchases.

For further explanation of this idea, please see the attached comments I made to USDA Secretary Johanns addressing one of his concerns (environmental consistency) relating to the new Farm Bill.

Please continue to count on our Association and its county members whenever you want assistance.

Best Regards;

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