



# THE FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE ADVISOR

Chronicling the progress of open space and farmland preservation in St. Clair County

## A Word from Ag Preservation Board Member Susan Sniegocki



I became interested in township affairs after attending several meetings in Clyde Township regarding the potential development of the Wingford Estate. I am happy to see it preserved today and hope it continues to be. Openings came up for the planning commission back then and I was dared by another to go for it.

I put my name in the hat and I never looked back. As one of the newcomers to the township and its politics, I knew I needed more education to do a good job as a planning commissioner. I attended every seminar I could find, mostly through the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission. It was about this time that I went to basic real estate class and became a realtor. As I learned, I kept in mind both my jobs as a commissioner and a realtor and I started to see that good planning for communities was mostly a balancing act. To keep our ordinances fair for the community and for the individual property owners is a very fine balancing act.

One of the earlier seminars I attended had speakers from Frankenmuth and Frankenmuth Township. It had a huge impact on me after hearing them compare the world to an apple. The earth is three-quarters water and one-quarter soil. After taking a quarter of an apple away, the tillable soil is half that, or one-eighth of the soil of earth. Even one-eighth looked pretty big until they scraped off the peeling, which represented the surface, or the tillable soil. Then it looked awfully small compared to a whole apple. Try that with an apple if you cannot visualize it. It is quite impressive. After that seminar, I decided to do what I could to help preserve agriculture.

Several years ago, Grant Township had several meetings to promote trips to Pennsylvania for preservation ideas. I attended the meetings but was not able to attend the trips. I was caught up in the enthu-

siasm with the local farmers and politicians. I was invited to join the group to help set up the ordinance for the county and I gladly joined. This county ordinance, and the township resolution that backs it up, gives our citizens the choice I believe they should have, which is to be able to preserve their land for future generations and still get some monetary gain from their land to pass on to their descendants. Since this is still in the early stages, there are some rough spots being ironed out. Without the early stages, however, we would never get to the final stage, which is a good financial base to help all who want to be helped. We are still working on that.

I have always believed that being an American meant having good choices and, as the realtor member of the Agricultural Preservation Board, I can live my belief in seeing this program come to life in St. Clair County. A Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program is a good choice for our farmers. Instead of splitting up the land for homes, farmers could get money to preserve their land, pass that on to their children, and still own the land! When they get ready to sell, they can sell to a farmer at farm prices. The buyer gets a great deal for good agricultural land, knowing the land cannot be split, and the original owner gets happy children and the satisfaction of knowing future generations will still have good farmland available to them. To me, this is the best of both worlds.

## Why St. Clair County “Cities” Need Farmland Preservation

By Kenneth R. Langmesser, Biosolids Coordinator, City of Port Huron

Biosolids are another reason that the cities in St. Clair County need farmland preservation. Cities need to secure a farmland base in close proximity to their borders. The cities in or near St. Clair County that are currently using local farm fields to apply biosolids are Port Huron, Marysville, St. Clair, Marine City, Algonac and New Baltimore. Biosolids are the collected solid materials removed from the water used by city residents, generated



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by wastewater treatment plants.

The application of treated biosolids to farmland is not only a cost effective disbursement method for the cities to clean up their wastewater, but it also generates cost savings for local St. Clair County farmers. Biosolids are rich in nitrogen and phosphorus, in the micro-nutrients needed for good plant growth, and in the organic matter which helps build better soils in our county. Biosolids also improve soil tilth, increasing water infiltration and limiting runoff into our streams and rivers.



*Photo courtesy of Dianna Seifert, City of Port Huron*

The practice of applying biosolids to local farmland started in earnest about 25 years ago and has grown in popularity ever since. Thousands of acres have been fertilized through this practice saving landfill space and the fuel oil needed to incinerate the sludge if this practice was not used. The Department of Environmental Quality recently released their Biosolids Recycling Program report and it showed that 92,363 dry tons of biosolids from 166 different communities were recycled on land in 2005, providing nutrients to crops across Michigan with a chemical fertilizer value equivalent to over \$9,800,000.

Farmers who take in biosolids from the City of Port Huron can receive on average anywhere from \$50.00 to \$75.00 worth of nutrients per acre per application. The main crops planted after biosolids are applied are corn and winter wheat. However, many other crops are grown to a lesser extent after application including soybeans, oats, hay, pasture and even nursery stock.

Without local farmland on which to apply biosolids,

the cost for trucking away the sludge would escalate and the citizens in local cities would see an increase in their sewage bills. In other parts of the state where urban sprawl is pushing farmland out further and further, cities are being forced to look at alternative methods of dealing with the sludge generated at their wastewater treatment plants.

With the construction of the ethanol plant in Marysville, just think of the perfect circle in recycling this venture holds, not only for local corn growers but for our local cities that generate biosolids as well. When you flush the toilet in your bathroom you could be helping to produce the fertilizer, which grows the corn that gets turned into ethanol, which fuels our cars so we do not need so much foreign oil.

## **Agriculture Provides \$60 Billion and 1 Million Jobs to Michigan's Economy**

From the Michigan Department of Agriculture

Gov. Jennifer Granholm said the findings of a study she requested confirm that Michigan's investment in agriculture, as well as its investment in alternative energy and biotechnology sectors, will be high-yield.

The Michigan State University report estimates the current and potential impact of Michigan agriculture on the economy to be more than \$60 billion annually and growing. The sector employs more than one million Michigan residents.

"Agriculture is an industry ripe with opportunity, and support from the 21st Century Jobs Fund will position them to be a leader in the alternative energy and biotechnology arenas," said Granholm. "Michigan is committed to cultivating an economic climate that allows all business to prosper."

The study found that over the last five years, agriculture received \$8.6 billion in public and private investment. Experts predict that over the next three to five years, the agriculture and food system will continue contributing significantly to Michigan's economic development, whether investment activity remains at current or increased levels.

The study covered all economic activity associated with food and non-food agricultural commodities such as leather, food, floriculture, ornamentals, turfgrass, and

bio-energy industries. The report concluded with discussions on both agri-tourism and the potential of a “bio-economy.”

Both of these areas for economic development need additional study before estimates can be made about their potential economic impact. The potential of the bio-economy may be especially large and cause the report’s other estimates of future economic impact to be underestimated.

The January 2006 study, entitled “*The Economic Impact and Potential of Michigan’s Agri-Food System*,” is available online through Michigan State University at <http://www.aec.msu.edu/product/documents/Working/Economic%20Impact%20of%20Michigan%20Agri-Food%20Final%20010906.pdf>.

## Donating Development Rights

Ownership of farmland carries with it the right to develop that land. But there may be situations in which owners would prefer to voluntarily restrict the non-agricultural development of the land. The restrictions are recorded with the County as a conservation easement and apply to the land forever.

In these situations, more and more landowners are finding it increasingly attractive to donate those development rights to a Farmland Preservation Program because

of the tax benefits such donations provide. Since the conservation easement is a donation, landowners are not compensated for the value of the development rights. However, they could pursue certain IRS tax advantages if they decide to treat the donation as a charitable gift. The donation and tax deduction may help to reduce capital gains taxation.

Donors enjoy the personal satisfaction of retaining ownership of their farms while knowing that the land will never be developed for purposes other than agriculture. Potential donors should consult their attorneys, accountants and/or financial planners when considering this farmland preservation option.

If you are interested in donating the development rights to your land, contact the Metropolitan Planning Commission at (810) 989-6950.

## Want to Help Protect Farmland in St. Clair County? Here’s How...

The St. Clair County Agricultural Preservation Board is completely funded by donations. The purpose of agricultural preservation is to preserve valuable farmland that would otherwise be developed. Once land is lost to development, it no longer retains the valuable farming qualities that once existed.

As evidenced in many counties south of St. Clair County, much of their farmland is now gone and cannot be retrieved. The State of Michigan has farmland preservation matching funds available to purchase development rights from landowners; however, funds are scarce and a lot of work needs to be done to get St. Clair County communities qualified to be eligible for grant funds.

The Ag Board is currently looking for funding to accomplish such tasks as public education, informing landowners of their preservation options, and getting the County in the best position to receive state grant funds, which are highly competitive.

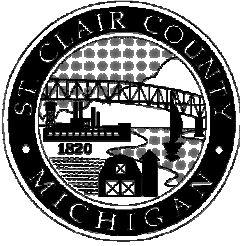
If you would like to make a financial contribution to the Agricultural Preservation Board, please *make your check out to the St. Clair County Agricultural Preservation Board* and mail to: c/o St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 200 Grand River Avenue, Suite 202, Port Huron, Michigan 48060.

### Thank You to Our Contributors!

The St. Clair County Ag Preservation Board would like to thank the following financial contributors:

- St. Clair Conservation District
- St. Clair County Farm Bureau
- Eastern Michigan Bank
- Eastern Michigan Grain, Inc.
- Michigan Milk Producers Association
- DTE Energy

If you or your organization would like to make a financial contribution to the Ag Preserve Board, please call (810) 989-6950.



## ST. CLAIR COUNTY AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION BOARD

c/o Metropolitan Planning Commission  
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## What Is A Conservation Easement?

From the American Farmland Trust

As part of the county's Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, when development rights are purchased, a conservation easement is placed on the land. Agricultural conservation easements are designed specifically to protect farmland. Grantors retain the right to use their land for farming, ranching and other purposes that do not interfere with or reduce agricultural viability. They continue to hold title to their properties and may restrict public access, sell, give or transfer their property as they desire. Producers also remain eligible for any state or federal farm program for which they qualified before entering into the conservation agreement.

Conservation easements limit land to specific uses and thus protect it from development. These voluntary legal agreements are created between private landowners (grantors) and qualified land trusts, conservation organizations or government agencies (grantees). Grantors can receive federal tax benefits as a result of donating

easements. Grantees are responsible for monitoring the land and enforcing the terms of the easements.

Easements may apply to entire parcels of land or to specific parts of a property. Most easements are permanent; term easements impose restrictions for a limited number of years. All conservation easements legally bind future landowners. Land protected by conservation easements remains on the tax rolls and is privately owned and managed. While conservation easements limit development, they do not affect other private property rights.

Agricultural conservation easements are a flexible farmland protection tool. Private land trusts and other conservation organizations educate farmers about the tax benefits of donating easements, and state and local governments have developed programs to purchase agricultural conservation easements from landowners. In addition, agricultural conservation easements can be designed to protect other natural resources, such as wetlands and wildlife habitat.

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