

AN INNOVATIVE PROCESS FOR ADDRESSING FARMING AND FARMLAND VIABILITY: CLARK COUNTY, OHIO

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Introduction

While support for farmland preservation is growing rapidly, the farmland preservation *community* – those individuals and organizations at the forefront, driving change – have traditionally represented only a specific band of interests. They are primarily working toward land protection and conservation through the use of state and federal funds, sometimes with a match at the local level, to purchase agricultural easements. In Clark County, the Tecumseh Land Trust, a very successful nonprofit land preservation organization, has worked with county planning officials and county commissioners to purchase agricultural easements and protect farmland through other planning and zoning strategies. While this method has achieved considerable success, it does not speak to the totality of farming *as a business*.

Recognizing the need to include more than “the usual suspects” concerned about land use in a discussion about the economics of a viable farm sector, Shane Farnsworth, Director of the Clark County Planning Agency, and Krista Magaw, Executive Director of the Tecumseh Land Trust, teamed together to address the totality of farming as a business. They applied to the OSU Center for Farmland Policy Innovation’s Farmland Protection Partnership Program (Box 1) to conduct the work described in this policy brief.

The relationship between the land trust and the county has developed over the years. In 2001, the County revised its subdivision and zoning regulations to impede large-lot (5+ acres) residential development. County planning staff has also tightened zoning of farmland protected by the State’s Agricultural Easement Purchase Program easements to ensure that these lands remain in

BOX 1: Farmland Protection Partnership Program

The Center for Farmland Policy Innovation partners with communities to conduct policy experiments. The main purpose of the policy experiments is to develop and convey information on likely the performance land and local economic policy options for Ohio communities, as well as other techniques that should be available, to those who can use it. Further, the Center conducts carefully defined policy experiments in the field to determine what other methods might be helpful, and what it would take to add them to the list of local policy tools. This land policy laboratory aids local policymakers in achieving what their citizens want through on the ground demonstrations of completed experiments. These experiments then become tangible models for the rest of the state.

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agricultural use. The county has a longstanding public-private partnership with the Tecumseh Land Trust (TLT), which has preserved over 13,000 acres of land in Clark and Greene Counties through conservation easements. The strong relationship between TLT and Clark County began through a partnership to preserve the Whitehall Farm in 1999, which became a catalytic event for the whole community. TLT now works with local planners to identify sites where preservation should be pursued. While this relationship – a land trust working with local planners – may be unusual, both parties benefit from the arrangement, and it allows the county to best realize its long-term planning goals. Further, this relationship created the foundation for pursuing the project that is the subject of this policy brief.



CENTER FOR FARMLAND
POLICY INNOVATION

DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

This report details (i) an innovative *process* for identifying farmland preservation opportunities, particularly as they relate to economic development opportunities, (ii) the continuing efforts of a local land trust to ensure farmland is permanently protected, and (iii) results of a survey used to gauge voter support for public funding of farmland protection, which can also be used to measure backing for the overall concept of agriculture as an economic development tool. Under the project leadership of Shane Farnsworth and Krista Magaw, two committees drove the project. The Ag in the Economy committee consisted of an innovative group of elected officials, business leaders, economic development leaders, and traditional agricultural interests. The Farmland Preservation Workgroup (FPW) was constituted by a more conventional membership of farmers, agriculture leaders, and activists. The constitution of the committees is discussed later in this report.

I Economic Development

The Economic Development Leadership

One of the innovations of the Clark County process is the constitution of the Ag in the Economy committee, which not only incorporated “the usual suspects” – preservation activists, local elected officials, and farmers – but also local business leaders (Box 2). Important leadership was provided by co-project leader Shane Farnsworth and the Clark County Community Improvement Corporation (CIC), which is the county’s nonprofit economic development organization housed within the local chamber of commerce. A number of business owners, many (but not all) of whom represent Clark County’s strong agricultural sector, participated in the committee. Therefore, many of the members are not only well-versed in the agri-business sector, but are invested in the local community, and actively served in

the committee’s discussion and contributed positively to the project’s results. By including business leaders not associated with the agri-business sector two things are possible. First, the importance of agriculture to the community could be communicated to business leaders that may not have considered the significance of farming in economic development. Second, these non-agribusiness leaders could lead efforts to discuss economic development approaches that are not traditional to the agri-business sector could take place. At the same time, the committee only included three representatives from local government. Co-project leader Shane Farnsworth noted that, from his experience, a committee needs an adequate balance among elected officials and government employees on one hand, and business and non-profit leaders on the other.

The Economic Development Process

The committee’s first task was to hire an agri-economic professional who would guide them in researching the latest developments in the agri-business industry. However, after their first meetings, members of the committee realized that they shared a wealth of agricultural knowledge among themselves. Therefore, the Ag in the Economy committee elected to partner with Springboard Marketing, a Springfield-based firm that, while lacking any formal agriculture experience, has invaluable knowledge regarding the business climate in Clark County. A division of labor was proposed: Springboard would conduct a market analysis, while the committee, which had a greater understanding of the agriculture industry, could contextualize the analysis. In a way, selecting a firm outside the realm of ‘traditional agriculture’ reinforces the innovative and inclusive nature of the Clark County project, and its goal to expand the agriculture community.

BOX 2: Clark County Ag in the Economy Committee Member Affiliations

Little Miami Flower Company
 Paygro (manure processing)
 Woeber Mustard
 Young’s Jersey Dairy
 Allied Environmental Group
 Westco Port Authority – local economic development authority
 Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce

Clark County Farm Bureau
 Ohio State University Extension
 Farmland Preservation
 Tecumseh Land Trust
 Springboard Marketing
 Clark County Planning Department

Box 3: The Economic Development Process, as developed by Springboard

Process	Description	Involvement
Research	Gather facts and statistics regarding Clark County, its assets, and leverageable strengths.	Springboard, AE committee, secondary sources
Exploration/Identification	Explore and identify Clark County opportunities for economic development	Springboard, AE committee, secondary sources
Exchange	Exchange information with local community experts as well as select individuals in other counties	Springboard, economic experts, local businesses, area stakeholders
Individual Ideation	Develop as many possibilities for economic development based on identified leverageable strengths/assets	Springboard, economic experts, local businesses, area stakeholders
Combine/Collaborate	Combine ideas and assets for synergistic economic development concepts	Springboard, economic experts, local businesses, area stakeholders
Evaluation	Assess ideas as to those providing the greatest potential for success and return	Springboard, economic experts, all stakeholders
Selection	Select top focused initiatives for pursuit	Core team

Working with the committee, Springboard developed a seven-step economic development process that not only involved itself and the committee, but local business experts and other area stakeholders. This iterative process (between the consultant and committee members) was largely oriented around SWOT – identifying the county’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Box 3). They conducted extensive research on the agri-business industry, identifying sectors within agriculture that are poised for extensive growth in the coming years. Further, they identified Clark County’s unique strengths, and through several discussions, how these local advantages could be employed to grow the Clark agricultural sector. Complementing this analysis was a robust investigation into local economic development policies with policy recommendations that will help Clark County grow its agri-business sector.

Springboard also served as a facilitator for committee meetings. Under this function, its primary role was to keep the committee focused on common goals. For

example, when committee members would become distracted, or argue about minute topics, the facilitator would refocus the group on common goals, such as quality of life and economic development. This kept the committee focused, while preventing any disagreements from becoming major issues.

The committee and Springboard reached a number of innovative ideas for ag-based economic development in Clark County. The county has many opportunities to grow its agricultural sector, including the fast-growing areas of aquaculture, nutraceuticals, and micro-/niche farming. Additionally, business leaders and government officials can work toward creating a ‘Clark County brand’ to distinguish locally-produced products. Developing a local brand should be complemented by an aggressive marketing effort that emphasizes the quality of Clark-produced products, as well as the environmental *and economic* benefits of purchasing locally produced goods. On the policy front, Springboard and the committee believes that a local coordination body should be established to organize agri-business efforts, and that local colleges

should work to improve their agri-business course offerings in areas of workforce development and management.

II Farmland Preservation Efforts

To complement the committee work spearheaded by Springboard and the Ag in the Economy committee, the Tecumseh Land Trust (TLT) (i) increased the scale and intensity of its farmland preservation efforts and (ii) conducted a mail survey to gauge voter interest in farmland preservation (described below). TLT completed a number of tasks designed to “ramp up” the pace of farmland preservation in Clark County. It distributed an informational mailing to 750 landowners in December 2006 that explained the benefits of donated preservation easements, as well as containing information regarding TLT’s easement purchase program. The land trust also held an estate planning training session in November 2006, where information was distributed about donated and purchased easements. Following these efforts, and possibly as a result of them, TLT completed nine donated easements in 2007, far and away a record for a single year.

III Voter Survey

For the survey, TLT and the project leaders were especially interested in voter support for a nominal, yearly payment – perhaps \$20 – that would be dedicated toward purchasing conservation easements and other farmland preservation strategies. These funds would be employed to preserve an additional 10,000 acres of farmland. The most striking finding of the survey was that it emphasized voter support for agricultural economic development and for the jobs and income that farming provides. This finding ties directly into the partnership (Tecumseh Land Trust and the county) efforts to bring *farmland* and the business of *farming* into the rubric of farmland protection. Therefore, the importance of agriculture to the economy should be part of any voter education if funding for farmland preservation is put on the ballot.

The survey was mailed to 893 randomly-selected voters in Clark County, and achieved a 10.4% response rate (after excluding the 100 surveys returned due to address changes). The survey found overwhelming support (over 90% of respondents) for the importance of agriculture in the economy and land use planning initiatives, while only a smattering of voters (14.7%)

voiced support for residential development in rural areas. Importantly, 91% of respondents believe that Clark County should adopt farmland preservation policies, while 77% believe that the County should directly fund the program. Ninety-eight percent of those surveyed believe that creating agricultural jobs and agri-economic development opportunities is important (with 42.9% citing that is very important). A follow-up telephone survey of respondents was completed in August, 2008. Results of the survey were presented to the Farmland Preservation Workgroup and the Clark County Commissioners in February 2009.

Conclusions and Future Work

The project leaders are optimistic that the activities conducted as part of this policy project Place Clark County in a unique position to compete for new agribusiness when the economy rebounds and to retain and expand current agri-businesses. In fact, the idea of looking inward for economic development opportunities, focusing on the county’s strengths instead of luring outside businesses to the area, is especially appropriate in this economic environment. Thinking about agriculture as an engine for economic growth is a new topic for the county, and quite unique in Ohio (aside from efforts in Wayne County, Ohio). The research conducted by Springboard and contextualized by the committee and the TLT voter survey confirm that agriculture can be an economic development initiative. Further, the CIC – the local economic development authority – has expanded its focus from attracting new businesses to its industrial park, and now is working toward retaining and expanding existing businesses, including those in the agriculture industry. Further, the CIC (and the Chamber) have taken a greater interest in pursuing/ assisting smaller agri-business opportunities throughout the community. They continue to pursue the larger business opportunities but now give the small businesses more time and energy. They have begun a concerted effort to pursue agricultural business expansions/locations after the analysis. Traditionally, they viewed agriculture as a Farm Bureau or Farm Service Agency responsibility. Collaboration with our Small Business Development Corporation has generated a lot of synergy among small business ventures specific to agri-businesses through the development of a business plan or technical training for the small businesses through Clark State Community College. However, despite this success, local leaders

are still struggling to connect individual farmers and larger scale agri-business attraction, retention, and expansion initiatives.

Pertinent to ongoing farmland preservation efforts, the Farmland Preservation Workgroup has not yet identified a particular funding source to increase the pace of agricultural conservation in Clark County. As of late 2008, the FPW believes that the best course of action would be to submit a ballot initiative to Clark County voters that would provide nominal funding for agriculture preservation efforts and contain a strong jobs component. Studying alternatives and developing/implementing a final course of action is a top priority in 2009 for TLT.

Important to the success of the project was its inter-jurisdictional nature, as it involved government officials from the City of Springfield, Clark County, and various local townships. TLT's relationships with township leaders, and the planner's relationship to the county allowed them to include representatives from the various governmental agencies. Getting their representatives to the same table was important, and bridging the gaps between these entities critical. To improve quality of life throughout Clark County, the jurisdictions must realize their mutual inter-dependence and work toward common goals. This project provided an excellent forum for thinking through these goals, as leaders were surrounded by business owners, economic development experts, and local stakeholders.

Some important takeaways

Regarding the committee:

- Only three of the fourteen members were government officials, which Mr. Farnsworth believes contributed to greater input from both non-profit organizations and business leaders. However, government officials were crucial to the project's success, and particularly important was that they represented different jurisdictions (city, county, townships).
- Mr. Farnsworth strived to incorporate individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds into the committee. For example, merely selecting a certain number of business leaders will not suffice; instead, choose individuals who represent different aspects of the economy, beyond traditional agriculture and agri-business.

- Committee members should be willing to participate. Do not have someone on the committee just because they fulfill a certain niche – a local farmer, for example. Choose a participant who is excited about the project and can fully contribute to its success.

Regarding the economic development process:

- The committee elected to select a market analysis firm that had local experience, instead of choosing an out-of-town firm that specialized in agricultural issues. Mr. Farnsworth believes that this decision positively contributed to the project. Springboard Marketing, the market analyst used for this project, is based in Springfield and has a long history of working on local issues. Springboard's local knowledge allowed it to tailor policy recommendations to the local political/economic environment. Further, Springboard comes from outside the traditional agricultural community, thus allowing them to 'think outside the box' on numerous issues.
- The project enjoyed favorable coverage from the media. The local newspaper printed a number of favorable articles about the process, which made local politicians happy.

Regarding the land trust

- TLT has traditionally focused on land use preservation, and their signature project is the Whitehall Farm. This project allowed them (and the larger agricultural community) to expand their focus to economic development and job creation/retention. Conducting a voter survey allowed TLT and the Farmland Preservation Workgroup (FPW) to verify citizen support for the link between land protection and jobs.

About the Center

The Center, established in 2006, resides at Ohio State University, and is associated with the OSU Extension Services. Our mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming. We work to spread local seeds of invention. Further, we work at the state and federal levels to further viable local agricultural environments.

Project website: <http://cffpi.osu.edu/Clark.htm>

For Further Reading

Greg Davis, Heide Martin, and Jill Clark. 2007. “Agri-business Retention and Expansion: Understanding the Potential of BR&E as Applied to the Agricultural Sector.” Available at <http://cffpi.osu.edu/docs/FinalAGBRE%20Document.pdf>

American Farmland Trust. 1998. “Agricultural Economic Development.” Fact Sheet. Available at http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/29476/FS_AED_9-98.pdf