

Conducting a County Agricultural Policy Audit

*Center for Farmland Policy Innovation
Department of Agricultural, Environmental and
Development Economics*

Research Brief #2011-1

April 19, 2011

Nathaniel Betz and Jill Clark



Agricultural Policy Audit

- I. Development of the Agricultural Policy Audit
- II. Policy Audit Background
- III. Components of a Successful Audit Process
- IV. The Project
- V. How to Make it Work
- VI. Resources

I. Development of the Agricultural Policy Audit

To fully evaluate the effect of county policies on its agricultural community, **Wayne County proposed a comprehensive audit to paint a clear picture of governmental influence in relation to agricultural industry.** Wayne County received both funding and guidance from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at The Ohio State University (Center). The Center administered a grant through its Farmland Protection Partnership Program (FPPP), a grant program that supports innovative policy and programming projects to generate models that promote the viability of farming and agriculture in Ohio communities. Katie Myers-Griffith, formerly of the Wayne County Planning Department served as the project manager.

This agricultural policy audit marks the first of its kind in the state of Ohio and the country. In

recognition of this groundbreaking effort, Wayne County used a portion of its grant funding to hire Jerry Weitz, AICP, as an outside consultant to help facilitate the process. Weitz did not come from an agricultural background, but pioneered the development of smart growth audits. Wayne County would use his expertise in the audit process to formulate the framework for their policy audit. The county chose the policy audit as the vehicle for its evaluation for the following reasons:

- It promotes a critical and introspective process of self-improvement.
- It is a flexible tool that can be tailored to meet the needs of any community.
- It can be performed, almost in its entirety, utilizing existing community resources.
- The quality and quantity of results are strongly correlated with the level of honesty and commitment of resources that the community/government decides to dedicate to the project.
- The ensuing results can be used to provide a rich description of the effects of government policy, as well as guide future efforts to improve the regulatory and governmental support for community priorities – in this case agriculture.

The Farmland Protection Partnership Program (FPPP) is a grant program of the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at The Ohio State University. Its objective is to pioneer innovative projects that promote agricultural economic development in Ohio communities and enhance the viability of farming and farmland. More information is available at <http://cffpi.osu.edu/program.htm>.

II. Policy Audit Background

The Wayne County policy audit is based on the smart growth audit, a model that has proliferated within the last decade, as a framework for evaluating how a city or region's policies affect the way it expands. As the Smart Growth Leadership Institute articulates, "a growing number of local political, civic and business leaders understand that with smarter patterns of growth and development, our towns, counties and cities can enjoy the fruits of growth without the costs of poorly planned development (2007, i)." This concern for the promotion of healthy growth comes as the dilatory effects of sprawling, expansive development (and its high public cost) become better known, and communities seek alternatives. On the surface, it is often difficult to piece together the cumulative effect of divergent policies, so the mission of the audit is to take a comprehensive view of overall community governance, in order to inform institutional support for policy priorities (whether smart growth, or concerning farmland issues). The smart growth audit makes three primary contributions (Final Report on the Des Moines Metropolitan Area Smart Growth Audit, 2006):

1. It identifies and publicizes the most effective and locally applicable regulatory mechanisms that best promote smart growth.
2. It compares these development regulations with the current regulatory policies of the community.
3. It measures the level to which current regulatory policy prevents smart growth, and the opportunity for improvement.

The Agricultural Policy Audit

An agricultural policy audit is a comprehensive evaluation of government policies and the implications for farmland and the agricultural sector.

Many communities outline smart growth principles in their comprehensive plans, but a more difficult step is the incorporation of these principles into their regulatory regimes (Ibid.). The purpose of the smart growth audit is to revise current policies and practices. Jerry Weitz, one of the earliest consultants to take up the smart growth audit process, states that the audit "must be viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself (Weitz & Waldner, 2002, 5)." The audit is only a first step in a process of revision, an enabling process for systemic change in what Weitz refers to as a community's "DNA" (Ibid., 1).

The most significant contribution of the Wayne County policy audit process is its focus on issues of agriculture, food, and farming. Increasingly communities across the country are becoming aware of the benefits of local agriculture, whether because they are dependent on it for economic success; want to expand capacity for local food production and consumption; or because they believe it contributes to an improved land use balance and quality of life for residents. The issue of government influence on agriculture becomes especially salient when considering the loss of quality farmland in communities that have not fully evaluated the effect of urban and suburban growth regulations. The Wayne County agricultural policy audit highlights the fact that a community's regulatory and policy structure can have major implications for both growth patterns and the health of its agricultural and farming sector.

III. Components of a Successful Audit Process

A successful audit is the culmination of a collaborative process of goal identification by government officials and community leaders. It marks the first step in a process that can only be successful with an

honest evaluation that facilitates commitment to further action in response to its own results. Weitz outlines seven key steps in the development of the audit process (Weitz & Waldner, 2002, 19-22):

1. The community must come to an agreement on exactly what standards it wants to support in its regulatory environment.
2. Local governance institutions must commit to the audit process. This is important because these bodies contain the funding and implementation capacities that are vital to an audit's relevance.
3. The stakeholders must decide on the scope and content of the audit, which may vary depending on the policy condition of each individual community.
4. Additionally, it is beneficial to contract an outside consultant to monitor the process, and to provide an experienced perspective unencumbered by the entanglement of local pressures, internal rivalries, and competition.
5. To complement the role of the auditor, the local government should also dedicate a project manager to the audit process.
6. Once this groundwork has been laid, the community should develop a specific criteria or checklist for the evaluation process, and then use it as a tool to assess the community's regulatory regime.
7. And finally, the community must prioritize implementation of the recommendations that ensue.

To ensure that these goals are accomplished, a monitoring process must be established. The institutional knowledge that the government gains in the first iteration of the audit process can be used to update and refresh the recommendations as the goals are achieved. The creation of an advisory board can help significantly in the attraction of diverse and informed input, as well as consistent external monitoring and accountability throughout the audit process.

IV. The Project

Wayne County, a largely agricultural community home to just over 111,000 people, conducted the policy audit in 2009. Located in Northeastern Ohio, Wayne County has a large agricultural population and over half of its residents live in rural areas. Reflecting the county's high volume of poultry and egg production, in 2007, the USDA Census of Agriculture ranked Wayne County third in the state in total value of all agricultural products sold. As one of its strongest industries, agriculture is a top

priority for the county government. **Throughout the 2000s however, there was growing concern that some existing governmental policies could be detrimental to the sector's growth. To address this issue, the county convened an AG Success Team to identify, evaluate, and address obstacles to successful agriculture.** This team was composed of representatives from several county organizations, including county commissioners, Ohio State University Extension, local farms, colleges, and economic

Value for Local Governments

The complex and interwoven nature of the various departments that combine to define local regulatory structure often make it difficult for government officials and other leaders to see the big picture and understand how governance affects agriculture and land use. The policy audit unravels the web of policy ramifications, allowing communities to better understand how government affects agriculture. With this knowledge local leaders can make future decisions based on an accurate understanding of how they will influence the viability of agriculture in their jurisdiction.

development groups. The team administered a producer survey to identify impediments to the agricultural sector and discovered that other than the cost of land, the three largest detriments to agricultural success were: sprawl due to residential expansion, taxation policy, and regulatory costs. Recognizing these impediments, the AG Success Team decided to promote agriculture as the county's top economic priority as well as to further investigate and revise local policies to fully reflect agriculture's importance.

In developing an agricultural policy audit, Wayne County made a major departure from the model of the smart growth audit by selecting an entirely new context for the review. However, it wanted to maintain the same level of comprehensive assessment and quality policy review that had been developed during the previous decade with smart growth audits. To achieve this, the county followed many of the steps articulated by Jerry Weitz to begin the audit process, and further contracted him as a consultant to help align their priorities within the developed and proven framework of the smart growth audit.

To establish a firm understanding of the agricultural policy audit process, Wayne County began by clearly defining four key concepts that would help guide the effort. These included the following:

Policy Audit: A comprehensive review of guidelines, procedures, and regulations of all county agencies and departments.

Agricultural Community: Not only the landowners/farmers but also the support systems necessary to sustain agriculture, including but not limited to: transportation systems, machinery operation and repair, grain elevators, open air markets, veterinarians, producers, consumers, research, and technology.

Agricultural Economy: Includes all financial inputs/outputs of farm production, not limited to the commodities on the farm, but including the entire infrastructure that a farm operation depends upon to exist.

Agricultural Policy: Policy that impacts (positively or negatively) the agricultural community as defined above. For example: Current Agricultural Use Valuation method of taxation, bridge load limits (and repair priorities) and the process of obtaining various licenses.

With its context defined, Wayne County composed a work plan that **articulated seven key objectives to comprise its audit process.**

1. Its first step was to **convene a "policy audit advisory board"** to assist in the development of the audit model. This team was composed of four individuals from the Ag Success Team that represented a balanced range of agricultural interests in the county including a local program manager for the National Science Foundation, a member of the county planning commission, the executive director of the Small Farm Institute, and a professor of political science at the College of Wooster. A **"policy audit review committee"** (composed of the advisory board, as well as a county commissioner, representatives from relevant county departments, a member of the school board, and a representative from one of the county's cities/villages) was also created to assist in the analysis of existing policies and resultant recommendations.
2. After securing the composition of its internal project management structure, its second objective was to hire an **outside professional consultant to assist its advisory team** in model design, interpretation of legal issues, and changes to existing policy.

3. With its review structure in place, Wayne County’s next objective was to administer a **survey to all county government offices to evaluate their impact on farming and the agricultural sector**.
4. Once the relevant governmental departments had been identified, the next objective was to **formulate a county-wide perspective of existing farmland policy** and past efforts at policy change, to further develop a context for the audit process.
5. Next, the county would **create the model** for its agricultural policy audit. This step would be done in close coordination with the outside consultant, and include best management practices, a record of methods used, failures and successes, and a website to make the information available to the public.
6. Using this model, the county would **conduct the final policy audit analysis** utilizing the information identified in the earlier survey of county departments and their impact on agriculture.
7. Finally, the last objective was to **provide a concluding evaluation of the audit process** and recommend any policy changes identified, to the Board of Wayne County Commissioners.

The completion of this model represents a truly innovative means of farmland policy change in Ohio and across the country.

V. How to Make it Work

Wayne County broke new ground with its agricultural policy audit. Its work offers an example to both statewide and national organizations and governments seeking to evaluate their level of institutional support for farming and agriculture, and to identify hindrances to its continued viability. Moreover, as project manager Katie Myers-Griffith states, **the policy audit becomes even more relevant as local food and other priorities emerge across the country and communities seek to improve their capacity to encourage them** (K. Myers-Griffith, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Several key components of the audit provide a framework for replication:

- First, the **departmental survey is integral to a comprehensive and accurate grasp of how each part of a local government or organization affects agriculture**.
- Another important step is the **formation of a policy audit advisory board composed of individuals capable of and willing to analyze the information** found in the surveys and discuss the prioritization of issues.
- And finally, an overall **policy audit review committee, composed of local decision-makers must serve as a vetting board** to identify and approve the most useful recommendations for local policy.

Diverse Applicability & the Local Foods Movement

The increasing popularity and momentum of the local foods movement and the development of local and statewide food policy councils across the country present new opportunities for the use of the agricultural policy audit. As these groups develop, they could benefit greatly from the information and perspective that the policy audit provides.

With so many people and overlapping teams analyzing government policy from a comprehensive perspective, it is possible to identify areas for improvement that are not as evident when considered on a separate, compartmentalized basis. Moreover, these steps follow the general framework pioneered by the smart growth audit (i.e. identification of policy priorities, evaluation of current alignment with those priorities, and recommendations for improvement). However, they insert a clear focus on farming and farmland issues, and make evaluative adjustments to reflect the agricultural topic.

Recognizing the diversity existing in various forms of government, the policy audit exists as a framework and a process of evaluation rather than a prescribed checklist. It is a broad but introspective process that encourages the identification of community priorities and goals in regard to agriculture, and a collaborative approach to policy harmonization and improvement. Further, this policy audit succeeds in setting the stage for the revisionary process whereby, as Weitz describes, a community can alter its “DNA” to reflect overt support for agricultural success within its jurisdiction. As land use pressures increase across Ohio and the country, this model will prove a useful tool for the understanding of how governance decisions affect agriculture, and how local leaders can protect and advance agricultural interests.

Copies of the Wayne County policy audit can be found at <http://cffpi.osu.edu/wayne.htm>.

VI. Resources

Iowa State University Extension. (2006). Final Report on the Des Moines Metropolitan Area Smart Growth Audit. Ames, IA.

Smart Growth Leadership Insitute. (2007). Smart Growth Policy Audit.

Weitz, J. & Waldner, S. (2002). *Smart Growth Audits*. Chicago, IL: American Planning Association.