

**Local Planning for Farmland in Ohio:
Summary Report on Farmland Preservation Task Force Planning in 15 Counties**

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Introduction

In Ohio, and across the nation, land use and farmland preservation issues have become topics of increasing concern. In response, a number of approaches have been called for to address these issues. While some states have enacted new zoning and growth control measures, others have focused on economic incentives and information dissemination. In Ohio, which has a strong tradition of “home rule,” choices about which tools to use to meet land use goals are largely in the hands of local government. Thus the future status of farmland, open space, and urban areas in Ohio largely depends on local-level decisions.

The state of Ohio has sought to encourage comprehensive planning at the county level through the Ohio Farmland Preservation Planning program. In June of 1998, the Ohio Department of Development’s Office of Housing and Community Partnerships (OHCP) announced a matching grant program for rural counties to prepare local farmland preservation plans. Grants of up to \$10,000 were made available to the 81 counties receiving Ohio Small Cities Community Development Block Grant funds. Funding was contingent on the counties providing a 1:1 match, in dollars or in-kind, and establishing a county farmland preservation task force including a “cross section of interests.” These funds were provided to county commissioners, who were responsible for creating the task forces. Subsequently, each task force was required to submit to the OHCP, by December 31, 1999, its farmland preservation plan. 61 of the 81 eligible counties participated in the grant program.

The grant program aimed to encourage planning across a wide variety of stakeholders, who would come together and develop a shared vision for land use goals and strategies in their county. Across the state, many individuals devoted substantial time and energy towards this end, creating a farmland preservation plan addressing the particular context of their county. With 61 task forces working simultaneously on their plans, many different planning processes were undertaken in a wide variety of local contexts. Thus, the program can be viewed as a kind of natural experiment in local farmland preservation planning. If we are to learn from such a natural experiment, it is important to gather and analyze data from the experiences of several different task forces.

In this report, we present information about the planning processes of 15 task forces. Following a brief description of our study methods, we describe information about several items, including planning processes, plan contents, factors associated with group success, and advice from task force members about how to develop farmland preservation plans.

Methods

For this study, we selected 15 of the 61 counties that participated in the Ohio Farmland Preservation Planning Program. Counties were chosen to represent a broad range of geographical locations and amounts of urban development. During late 2000 and early 2001, we interviewed at least two members of each county level task force. In order to encourage open and honest discussions, we guaranteed confidentiality to all those who participated in the interviews; therefore the names of interviewees and their counties are not divulged in this report. In addition to interviews, we analyzed the completed farmland preservation plans.

Planning Processes

Planning processes varied greatly across the fifteen counties. Three components of the planning process are described below and presented in Table 1: task force membership, meetings, and information sources.

Task force membership ranged from nine to 51 members. Most task forces reported that farmers and/or local government officials were the dominant stakeholders represented on the task forces. In contrast, developers, real estate interests, and environmental groups were less represented on most task forces. In most cases (ten of fifteen), task force members were selected through appointments or an invitation process, as county commissioners or other task force leaders sought to include a variety of stakeholder interests. The remaining five task forces were constituted using people who volunteered to serve, through advertisements and public meetings.

Meetings were an important part of the planning processes. Nine of the fifteen task forces met monthly from early through late 1999. Several task forces had a smaller number (three to five) of large task force meetings and completed the bulk of the work for the plan outside of the meetings. Roughly half divided into smaller subcommittees to discuss specific issues such as land use regulations, agriculture, economics, infrastructure/transportation, and education. While task force meetings typically were run by a member, three task forces hired consultants to facilitate the meetings.

Task forces used a variety of information sources to develop their farmland preservation plans. Most task forces obtained agriculture and/or economic data from OSU Extension, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, County Auditor offices, American Farmland Trust, and Farm Bureau. Several task forces brought in guest speakers from health departments, waste management departments, and homebuilder associations to speak about issues related to farmland preservation. Six task forces hired consultants to write the final plan. An additional source of information was farmland preservation plans or comprehensive land use plans from other counties.

One source of information of particular interest is public opinion surveys. Seven task forces conducted landowner/public opinion surveys to assess community opinion towards farmland preservation and land use in general. In some cases these surveys were randomly mailed to landowners in the county, while in other cases they were distributed at events such as county fairs and township meetings. All 15 task forces who completed a survey reported that it provided useful information. Several task forces who did not complete surveys mentioned that it would have been useful to conduct one.

Another source of information of interest is geographic information systems (GIS). Seven task forces had access to geographic information systems, either through county offices or paid consultants, to develop maps outlining current and proposed land use. Several other counties are looking at ways to develop local GIS capability. As GIS seems to be an emerging tool in land use planning across the state, it is important to understand its usefulness. Of the counties who used GIS systems, most reported that it provided very useful information, but several said that the information was only marginally useful.

Table 1: Planning Processes

Task Force	# of members	Selection process	Meetings	Formal subgroups	Who led meetings	Opinion survey	G.I.S.
1	28	invited and open mtgs	monthly	No	OSUE	No	No
2	15	appointed	monthly	No	Consultant, Plan Commiss., Chair	No	No
3	16	appointed	monthly	No	OSUE, Citizen chair	Yes	Yes
4	40	invited	monthly	No	Consultants, Farm Bureau rep, SWCD, Planning commiss.	No	Yes
5	9	invited and appointed	monthly	Yes: Public farmland preservation, Private FP, Education	OSUE	Yes	Yes
6	51	invited and open mtgs	monthly	Yes: Farm-land preserv-ation, Public survey, Vision and mission, Transport.	OSUE, Citizen chair	Yes	Yes
7	47	invited	3 all-TF meetings	Yes:Steering, Agriculture, Zoning, Economics, Information, and Legal	SWCD	Yes	No
8	16	invited and pre-existing committee	monthly	Yes: PDR	Citizen chair	Yes	Yes
9	21	invited and open mtgs	9 all-TF meetings	No	SWCD, OSUE, Planning commiss.	Yes	No
10	9	appointed	monthly	No	Planning Director, OSUE	No	No
11	13	appointed	5 all-TF meetings	No	Planning commiss.	No	No
12	34	invited and open mtgs	monthly	No	Planning commiss., Citizen chair	No	Yes
13	18	appointed	monthly	Yes: Storm water, Thorough-fare, Trans-portation	Planning Director, Citizen chair	Yes	Yes
14	13	appointed	5 all-TF meetings	Yes: Executive	Regional planning commis., Consultant	No	No
15	30-40	invited and open mtgs	5 all-TF meetings	Yes: Steering	Consultant	No	No

The Plans

The only grant requirement for plan contents was that they must include “identification of soil types in the county via a classification system and mapping.” Other than this component, task

forces had flexibility to include what they wished. The fifteen task forces in this study developed plans as varied as the committees that created them. Plans ranged in length from 14 to 331 double-spaced equivalent pages (see Table 2). Most of the plans (11 of 15) contained the required soil data.

Table 2: Plan Components

Task Force	Page length (ds) with appendices	Required soil data?	Number of recommend.	Most frequent recommendation type
1	24	No	6	regulatory
2	83	Yes	13	regulatory
3	97	Yes	15	lobbying
4	138	Yes	15	lobbying
5	331	Yes	24	voluntary
6	56	No	none	n/a
7	88	Yes	8	regulatory
8	178	Yes	12	regulatory
9	25	Yes	10	education
10	80	No	21	regulatory
11	76	No	5	lobbying
12	47	Yes	10	regulatory
13	134	Yes	10	regulatory
14	83	Yes	37	education
15	14	Yes	6	regulatory / planning (tie)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>Mean 97</i>	<i>11 Yes</i>	<i>Mean 13</i>	<i>regulatory</i>

Similarly, the number and nature of policy recommendations varied depending on particular issues in the county. Therefore the policy recommendations developed in one county may not be appropriate for other counties. Table 2 above presents a summary of the most frequent type of policy recommendations in each plan. Recommendation types are divided into seven categories for analysis: voluntary programs (e.g., land owners who enroll in a program such as CAUV are entitled to certain benefits), regulations (e.g., zoning restrictions), education/information dissemination, research (study or examine a particular phenomenon), planning (e.g., develop a county comprehensive plan), lobbying (e.g., pressure state officials to change a particular land use statute), and other (e.g., create a new county-level office responsible for spearheading farmland preservation efforts). Across the 15 plans, the most frequently cited recommendation type was regulatory.

Successes

The task force members cited several attributes of group success. Nearly every task force reported that they were successful, based on meeting the goals of the grant by convening a task force and completing a plan. Members of several task forces mentioned that this program was an

educational opportunity for the county and that the process increased community awareness and communication on farmland preservation issues. Some task forces lauded it as an opportunity for stakeholders to voice their opinions. In two cases, members reported that they were confident their plan produced something that would be implemented in local land use policy.

While most task force members described their groups as successful, representatives from ten of the counties also mentioned some challenges. The primary concern dealt with the implementation of the plans. Members cited several obstacles, such as lack of political support, community interest, and local funding for implementation. Several task forces also indicated that it was difficult to maintain involvement in the task force and that attendance dwindled over time.

Task force members attributed the outcomes of their groups to several factors. Most cited group dynamics as a prominent factor that affected group success. This included elements such as breadth of stakeholder representation, quality of leadership, and dedication of members. Other members listed support and cooperation with other agencies, such as the County Commissioners' office, OSU Extension, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts as a key to group success. Several groups also stated that previous experience with planning, such as having a recently updated County Comprehensive Plan and established land use regulations, helped with the process. Interestingly, however, a member of one task force stated the opposite, arguing that his county's task force benefited from the lack of previous planning efforts and land use regulations, because there were no presumptions about how things needed to be done.

Advice To Other Counties

During interviews, task force members were asked to reflect on their planning experiences and provide advice for other counties developing farmland preservation plans. While each response reflects the particular needs and challenges within an individual county, there are several pieces of advice shared by members from many different task forces. Four common themes are evident: dynamics of the task force itself, cooperation and collaboration with other agencies and groups, overall approaches to farmland preservation, and a general commitment to land use planning.

Most counties reported that the composition of the task force is instrumental to a successful planning effort. This includes issues such as diverse representation of interests, dedication of individual members, and good leadership.

“It's probably pretty obvious, but I think the wide variety of people from different areas was really important. Also, give consideration to personality types and how good they are at working together. Also, a well-respected leader was critical.”

“You just have to care and get people who care. You have to emphasize teamwork. You need to have all these different groups working together. You can't just have one person making all the decisions for everybody. And you need to be careful not to forget anybody.”

“My advice would be to get as many community interests as possible represented, not just the farmers. We can't force these issues on people. We need to get as

many people as possible – bank, real estate, farmers, as diverse a mix as possible. That will make it easier to sell this to the community.”

Several counties also mentioned the importance of positive cooperation and collaboration with other agencies and groups outside of the task force, such as the County Commissioners’ office.

“It’s also important to have the Board of Commissioners in unanimous support of the project.”

“You need to listen and try to build bridges with other groups.”

“Real important is networking. You really need to have a strong network of people established. I was the link between many different groups in getting the plan done. I kept the County Commissioners updated. If you don’t have support of decision makers, the task force won’t get anywhere.”

A few counties recommended looking at the entire issue of land use, rather than focusing on farmland preservation.

“I am not a fan of the title ‘Farmland Preservation.’ I think it is too limiting. The goal is to keep [our county] different, so people will want to still live here in 30 years. We don’t want it to look like Franklin County. There are lots of ways to do this. Farmland preservation is just one way.”

“My advice would be to not call this farmland preservation. Farmland preservation will be one of the results hopefully, but it is not the real objective. You are not going to stop economic development. You need to let that happen. You just need to direct it to where it is best suited.”

Lastly, several counties stated that an overall commitment to planning is important for the success of farmland preservation efforts.

“Having a Planning Commission doing the Comprehensive Plan was very important. If we hadn’t had the information support, we wouldn’t have gotten anything done.”

The hard part is deciding to get started. You need to make a commitment to invest in planning.”

Conclusion

By its very nature, farmland preservation is largely a local issue in Ohio. The Farmland Preservation Planning program provided funds for 61 rural counties to develop plans tailored to local contexts. A variety of planning processes were carried out, with a wide range of recommendations put forth in the completed plans. Many participants viewed the experience as

a promising one, helping to raise awareness of farmland preservation issues and build networks among relevant parties.

Relatively few task forces felt confident that their plan would be implemented in local policies; those that did tended to be in counties that were conducting broader land use planning, where the task force recommendations could feed into the comprehensive plan. This connection between farmland preservation and comprehensive land use was apparent in the advice from members of several task forces. Members did not foresee successful farmland preservation as likely in isolation from other considerations. In other words, the degree to which the recommendations provided in the plans will come to fruition will probably depend, in large measure, on their complementarity with other issues of local concern. To explore the question of how the completed plans, and the planning process, will impact land use policy, the authors are currently undertaking followup research in a subset of the 15 counties.