

Position statement of the Respect Farmland movement

Many Lancaster County residents - and especially Manheim Township residents - are concerned about the proposal to build a new suburban community on the southwest edge of the village of Oregon. They have raised five major concerns:

First, construction of a massive 565-unit housing development, a full-size grocery, a mini-mart, a retail shopping complex, and a four-story hotel is grossly out of scale for this historic crossroads village that has grown to no more than 50 houses since its founding in 1717.

This sprawling complex, bringing more than a thousand new residents and 25,000-plus car trips per day, would overwhelm the village and destroy its character. In a few years, this plan would build more than ten times the housing erected in Oregon over the past 300 years.

Second, this proposal requires the condemnation of preserved farmland, an action that, if successful, would set a precedent that undermines and ultimately destroys Lancaster County's farmland preservation effort. It is wrong that one farm family, for personal enrichment, would seek condemnation of its preserved farmland and that of a neighboring Amish farmer, creating such devastatingly negative consequences.

Under programs established by the Lancaster County Commissioners and supported by past boards of the Manheim Township Commissioners, taxpayers have paid nearly \$225 million and private donors have raised an additional \$14 million to buy the development rights of more than 100,000 acres of farmland in this, the nation's most productive non-irrigated farming county.

If government officials can condemn preserved farmland and turn it over to developers, the guarantee of perpetual preservation promised to 800 farm families and to taxpayers will be null and void. A quarter billion dollars would be wasted. And such a precedent would similarly undermine programs in other counties across Pennsylvania.

Third, this suburban development, planted in the midst of farmland 5 miles north of the Manheim Township suburbs and 5 miles south of Akron Borough, would unleash suburban sprawl north and south on the Route 272 corridor. It would bring massive traffic congestion, comparable to that on the Fruitville and Lititz pikes.

Traffic flow on the Oregon Pike south of Landis Valley already is problematic. Adding the trips from 500-plus households and 100-plus hotel guests, not to mention traffic to and from the proposed grocery and other retail stores, would overrun existing roads.

The complex would bring massive increases in spending on road improvements, police protection and school costs to accommodate those living in this new suburb.

Because of its size and location, this project fundamentally violates the intent and spirit of Lancaster County's long-standing plan to direct growth in and adjacent to existing urban areas.

Fourth, this plan would take out of production some of nation's most productive farmland. In 1883, Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, the seminal historians of Lancaster County, observed that "there are few, if any, better agricultural properties to be found in the county than some of those which are to be seen in Manheim Township." That assessment stands today. But, under this proposal, this land, in the last remaining agricultural area in Manheim Township, would be bisected by development.

Fifth, this proposal would disrupt an Old Order Amish church community of 10 to 12 homesteads that spreads in a broad band east and west of Oregon. These families currently face difficulty driving horse-drawn carriages and farm equipment on the roads around their farms. They find it especially difficult to cross Rt. 272. The traffic generated by a new suburb would increase that hardship significantly, making it more risky than ever to move equipment among farms or take a buggy to church services.

Finally, an argument advanced by proponents of this massive development must be answered. The developers have suggested that their proposed construction provides much needed housing for the county's growing population.

The Respect Farmland group recognizes the need for housing and fully supports additional residential construction in the county for our children and for newcomers to the community. But we believe such construction should take place only on the many vacant tracts, lots and underused parking lots in and next to Lancaster City and outlying towns. There are scores of such tracts - close to jobs, public transportation and schools - in existing suburbs. Home construction there would not destroy a single acre of viable farmland.

At its core, the Oregon Dairy proposal shows no respect for the farmers of Lancaster County and the way of life that helps the county maintain its work ethic and agrarian culture. It shows no respect for the taxpaying citizens of Lancaster County who, on multiple occasions, have voted overwhelmingly to support farm preservation.

For all these reasons, we ask the Manheim Township Commissioners to reject the proposed Oregon Dairy expansion and to put on record their absolute objection to the seizing of preserved farmland for residential or commercial development.