

Farm Preservation Falling Short of Goal

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FREDERICK -- The Frederick County Commissioners' goal to permanently preserve 100,000 acres of county farmland by 2020 is not likely to be met.

It's not that the money isn't available to purchase easements, but farmers don't seem to be willing to limit the use of their land in that way.

"We need to average over 4,500 acres a year over the next 15 years to reach that goal," said Tim Blaser, land preservation administrator for the county.

It's more likely that the county will preserve roughly 90,000 acres by 2020, according to projections from the Frederick County Division of Planning.

The county has about 32,000 acres of farmland under easement -- which restricts the farm deed so the property can only be used for agricultural purposes.

That suits Grayson Michael of Smithsburg fine. He put 171 acres of farmland into the county's Installment Purchase Program earlier this year.

"The main thing is I wanted to keep it farmland," Mr. Michael said. "I didn't want to see a dozen houses on it."

He has owned the Wolfsville farm since 1953 and raises corn and hay on it.

Farmers like Mr. Michael may be dwindling, though.

"We could get almost 10,000 acres of land under easement in 2006, but we don't have the applications," Mr. Blaser told the commissioners.

He said one reason for the low number of applications is farmers want to see how high land prices in the county go.

Robert Black, owner of Catocin Mountain Orchard, said he has heard some farmers who are unhappy being in a county preservation program.

"They went into the program a few years ago and now they look around and see how much more they could have gotten and they aren't happy," Mr. Black said.

However, when the county's housing boom cools, so will a major source of revenue the county uses to purchase easements. Fifteen percent of the county's recordation tax is dedicated to easement purchases for agricultural preservation.

Recordation taxes are collected when properties are refinanced or change hands.

In fiscal year 2005, which ended June 30, the county had budgeted \$1.06 million for agricultural land preservation, according to the adopted budget.

"If you do want into the IPP program, you need to get it in now because there will be a time there won't be the money," said County Commissioner John Lovell Jr.

Mr. Blaser said one thing that can be done to increase the amount of protected farmland is to accept properties that have no development rights.

Mr. Black said the county is preserving some low-quality farms.

"They are wasting their money on saving land that never going to have a house on it," Mr. Black said.

He points to the land in the Redland area that is now preserved. According to Mr. Black, the topsoil is thin, and the land won't pass a percolation test, which is required for residential development.

"Some farmers can farm on it, but it's never going to be developed," Mr. Black said.

He said the money could have been better spent protecting high-quality farmland or land that is under pressure to be sold to developers.

The county has a variety of programs to attract farmers. They operate in similar ways, though the funding sources differ. The most popular is the IPP. The county purchases an easement and pays for it over time using a zero-coupon bond. The property owner receives tax-free interest from the bond and a lump-sum principal payment at the end of the bond's term between 10 to 20 years.

"They are giving a thing of value," Mr. Blaser said. "In this county, that's got an enormous amount of value to it. This is a fair way for a farmer to get equity out of this land without having to sell it."

Other funding sources for the programs comes from state and federal grants, cost-share programs such as the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation and the Federal Farm and Ranch Protection Program, the local share of the county's agricultural transfer tax and county operating funds.