

Installment 4 of 12: Who benefits from farmland protection?

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In the previous articles on the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Program I have focused on the basics of a conservation easement, why individuals would consider participating in such a program, and what life looks like after a conservation easement is in place. This month I'll address some of the benefits—both personal and public—when a property goes into a conservation easement. For the land owner the benefits are easy to identify. In many cases the Farmland Protection Board purchases the conservation easement outright, so there is a cash payment as a benefit. If all or part of the conservation easement was a donation there may be tax advantages as well. Also, for many of our farmers who participate in this program there is the satisfaction that they know their farm will be protected forever.

Can a conservation easement on a farm extend its benefits to the greater community? The short answer is yes it can. Properties under a conservation easement ensure that agriculture will remain a viable part of the local economy. Since the development rights have been extinguished, easement properties go on the real estate market generally at a reduced price. This means farmers, or people wishing to go into farming, have an opportunity to purchase farmland at less than full market value and that means that farming continues to be a viable activity. Growing agricultural products locally means the continuation of a vibrant economy and keeps farmer's markets, granaries, livestock auctions, agriculture equipment vendors, and restaurants that focus on farm to table dining in the mix. Diversified economies are healthier and less prone to economic downturns than economies that are based on fewer economic sectors, so having a local economy that is in part based on agriculture keeps us diverse. Nationally, a growing segment of the economy is made up of businesses that sell products derived from local agriculture (think restaurants, wineries, distilleries, Christmas tree farms, and custom butcher shops to name a few).

Since conservation easements prevent subdivision of the land, another benefit is the maintenance of open space. How open space benefits a community will differ depending upon with whom you speak to, but I think most people would agree that the beautiful views of North and Sleepy Creek Mountains and the distant Blue Ridge are some of the things that make life special in the Shenandoah Valley. Properties that have been farms for 200 years will never be converted into a development when under a conservation easement; so local history is preserved as well. Beyond the aesthetic quality of open space, acreage not covered in hard or impervious materials helps recharge the ground water table and this is especially true for our farms and wooded lands that lay over limestone. Many communities derive their drinking water from ground water (think of all the private wells in the county in addition to water the public service district pulls from springs, which are directly coupled to ground water). Open spaces also tend to buffer storm water runoff and this helps prevent flash flooding in local streams and creeks. These protected properties also offer habitat for wildlife, and when several protected properties are adjacent to one another it's possible to create wildlife corridors where native plants and animals may thrive.

Lastly, farms and open space tend to demand very little of public infrastructure. The demand for roads, schools, police protection, and emergency medical services will always be much lower for open space and farms than it is for residential or commercial development. That lower demand helps keep taxes low and allows policy makers to focus on supplying public infrastructure where it is needed most.

So these are just a few personal and social benefits protecting farmlands and open space bring to the county. In February, I'll talk about the various funding sources used to purchase conservation easements.

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