

Installment 6 of 12: *Rating applicant properties*

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If you've been following this series for the past 5 months you've learned about conservation easements and how they protect farmland and land with significant agricultural or ecological resources. I've discussed what life is like once a conservation easement goes into effect, and last month I addressed the various funding sources used by the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board to acquire a conservation easement. The question I'll answer this month is "how are properties selected for a conservation easement?"

The process of selecting candidate properties is much the same regardless of whether the easement is being purchased or donated. Because each of the purchased easements involves public funds, the Farmland Protection Board follows a specific procedure to evaluate and rate applicant properties. Only highly scored properties are then chosen; either to purchase a conservation easement or receive a donation of the easement. I mentioned in last month's article that in any given year there may be multiple funding sources and each one seems to focus on a separate aspect of conservation, and you can see that in the scoring process. Locally, the Farmland Protection board uses a score sheet that is approved by the County Council. We award points for properties under development pressure, offers of large acreages, land that contains high quality soil, or that have demonstrated historic, scenic or ecological values. Locally we also award points for outright donations or reduced price offers of a conservation easement. All applications are scored locally and when funds are sufficient we purchase conservation easements on the top-rated properties using our transfer tax revenue. At the Federal level, the largest funding stream to date comes from what's now called the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. This program is a direct authorization from the Farm Bill and properties funded under ALE are awarded points based on the agricultural value of the land. Large farms, significant acreage of prime or statewide important soils, production of commodity crops, and the presence of highly erodible soils are all important considerations when a property is scored for ALE funding. The Agricultural Land Easement program has become increasingly competitive and, with reduced funding, fewer local farms are being selected locally.

A third funding stream is about to start up. Another authorization from the Farm Bill, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) that I discussed last month will set aside some \$2 million dollars for conservation easements over the eight West Virginia counties that are within the Potomac River watershed. This program focuses on the protection of waters that drain into the Chesapeake Bay, and thus the scoring criteria for RCPP are very different from ALE. For example, high scores will be granted for properties offering large acreages, significant amounts of qualifying soils, long lengths of stream exposure, large acreage on karst, or where caves, sinkholes, or springs are present.

At the moment, we are in a period where three different funding sources emphasize different features of a property. This should ensure that a broader diversity of land types are placed under easement. Certainly many of these have been and will continue to be working farms, but protecting ground water, good trout streams, and important ecological sites helps keep our local environment and economy diverse. So let's imagine that funding is available, you've applied to put your farm under a conservation easement, it rated at the top on the scoring sheet and the farmland protection board has formally offered to purchase a conservation easement on your land. What comes next? I'll outline the steps involved in the acquisition of a conservation easement next month.

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