RURAL PLANNING AND AGRICULTURAL LAND PRESERVATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF HURON COUNTY, ONTARIO

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The long-term welfare of many rural communities is dependent upon the preservation of the agricultural land resource. Not only is the physical loss of farmland a threat to an active agricultural industry, but so too are the restrictions that tend to accompany the gradual introduction of non-farm uses in agricultural areas. This paper reviews the evolution of agricultural land preservation within the Province of Ontario, with a specific focus on the successful approaches employed at the local level within the County of Huron. These local approaches have a central goal of not only protecting farmland, but also of minimizing potential regulation that might encumber the farm community. A key component of this overall approach is the development and implementation of an integrated approach to planning that addresses economic development.

INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of perspectives on the importance of protecting high quality farmland. Some would argue that because of low commodity prices, agricultural surpluses, inexpensive food imports and the overall pessimism that exists in certain agricultural sectors that there is no point in preserving farmland and that its protection is no longer an issue. Conversely, others would argue that the protection of farmland should be a national and local priority based on the need to protect both food production potential and the role of agriculture in the local and national economy.

Likewise there are a variety of public sector approaches to the protection of farmland. Within Canada and the United States these approaches tend to vary by province or state. A review of these approaches identifies, among others, the use of legislation, the purchase or transfer of development rights, tax incentives, comprehensive planning, ordinances and zoning as basic tools used to preserve farmland (Pfeffer and Lapping 1995, Furuseth et al. 1982, Daniels 1986, 1991 and Peters 1990). There are, however, some basic differences between the approaches used in Canada compared to the United States. To a certain extent these differences reflect the absence of property rights within the Canadian constitution. Although legislation has been used in British Columbia and Quebec, and the Niagara Tender Fruit Lands Program (1995) recently introduced in Ontario (reflective of the American approach to the transfer or purchase of development rights), the Canadian approach to agricultural land preservation can generally be described as policy and process based. In both Canada and the United States, however, it can be argued that ultimately the success of provincial or state initiatives will largely depend upon local acceptance of the initiative. Moreover, local jurisdictions may implement their own programs to protect the agricultural resource. In some instances these local approaches may exceed provincial or state requirements and in many instances the local municipality is likely to be the main advocate for the protection of farmland. Huron County, located in south-western Ontario, is one such example.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area in Census Farms</th>
<th>Improved acreage</th>
<th>Number of farms</th>
<th>Average farm Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>14,932,280</td>
<td>10,756,610</td>
<td>82,448</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>13,470,653</td>
<td>9,551,950</td>
<td>68,633</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1: Ontario: Comparison of Farmland Acreage, Number of Farms and Average Farm Size

THE ONTARIO CONTEXT

Ontario possesses the most intensive and diversified agriculture industry in Canada. It leads all provinces in total farm cash receipts with approximately 25 percent of the national total. It is also the most populous province with 10,084,885 residents in 1991. The total growth in the provincial population between 1981 and 1991 was nearly 1.5 million people or approximately half of the entire country's total population growth during the same period. The vast majority of this population and population growth and the vast majority of the agricultural industry is concentrated in southern Ontario in the relatively small area bounded by Lakes Ontario, Erie and Huron (Figure 1). Between 1981 and 1991 there was a 9.8 percent reduction in total farmland and a 16.8 percent reduction in the total number of Ontario's farmers (Table 1). Although many changes within the agricultural industry contributed to these statistics there can be no doubt that the rapid expansion of major urban centres and increasing rural non-farm development contributed significantly. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (1992) for example, notes that 51,870 acres of rural land were converted from rural uses

Figure 1: Huron County in Southern Ontario
around Ontario's 26 major urban centres between 1981 and 1986.

This relatively rapid urbanization of southern Ontario represents the continuation of an ongoing trend that has contributed to significant losses of Ontario's farmland. A study by Krueger (1959) on the loss of tender fruit lands in the Niagara Peninsula was one of the first in Canada to focus attention on the issue of agricultural land loss. Continued research in the Niagara Peninsula and elsewhere gradually lead to provincial action in the early 1970s (Krueger 1982). In 1973 the provincial government created the Food Land Development Branch, later renamed the Food Land Preservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. The provincial election that followed in 1975 further highlighted the significance of the loss of agricultural lands and contributed to the 1976 release of the Strategy for Ontario Farmland. At the same time the Ministry of Housing, in conjunction with the County of Huron, released a study entitled Countryside Planning (MacLaren, 1975) that developed a planning methodology for use in rural areas. Also in 1976, the Ministries of Agriculture & Food, Environment, and Housing released the Agricultural Code of Practice that included formulae to assist with the calculation of separation distances between livestock barns, residences and other non-farm uses in the countryside. This document was a guideline intended to help minimize the risk of nuisance conflict between farm and non-farm uses. Each of the above documents contributed to the Food Land Guidelines released in 1978 as a policy statement of the Government of Ontario on planning for agriculture. Much of the thrust of the Food Land Guidelines was retained with the Provincial Governments 1994 Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements and implemented as part of the overhaul of the Ontario planning system.

The provincial approach to planning for agriculture reflected in the Food Land Guidelines reflects a concern related to the loss of farmland and a broader set of issues related to the impact of non-farm development in an agricultural and rural community (Bryant and Russwurm 1979). The problems associated with non-farm development are summarized as follows:

- The Agricultural Code of Practice, developed by several provincial ministries, includes formulas for establishing separation distances between residences and livestock buildings. For every new residential lot created in the Agricultural area there is a corresponding buffer limiting the establishment or expansion of livestock operations.

- Each additional residence established in the agricultural area changes the farm/non-farm composition of the community. Over time the non-farm population may become dominant with a corresponding impact on local politics and decision making.

- The development of non-farm lots may also reduce a farmer's options by fragmenting the land base. This may complicate the assembly of large contiguous farm holdings; add a speculative value to farmland and reduce the flexibility of the farmer to respond to changing economies and farming practices. Over time this may contribute to the under utilization of the productive capacity of the farm.

- Reductions in the number of farms and farmland through either urban expansion or scattered residential development (including the purchase of farms for non-farm or hobby purposes) has the potential to weaken the agricultural commercial service sector. As the demand for these services is reduced it is probable that certain services will be lost with a corresponding impact upon remaining farms.

- The role of the rural service center is also affected by rural non-farm development. Towns, villages and hamlets have tradition-
ally provided a range of commercial, social and residential services to the agricultural community. If development occurs in rural areas as opposed to small service centers there is a risk that the residential and social fabric of these centers will be weakened.

The *Food Land Guidelines*, from the provincial viewpoint, promoted an approach to planning that emphasized the importance and priority of agriculture within rural areas. It has functioned as a statement of Government Policy, has been used in plan review and approval and has been used in the review of individual development proposals. The Guidelines include, among others, the following major points:

- the designation and protection of lands with agricultural potential, with emphasis placed on specialty croplands and CLI class 1 to 4 soils (The Canada Land Inventory (CLI) rates soils according to their agricultural capability on a scale from 1-7);

- land use policies which restrict the development of non-farm uses, including residential and highway commercial, from establishing outside of recognized urban areas, without sufficient justification;

- the preservation of large contiguous agricultural areas, including a large farm parcel size. Agriculture is defined as including farming of all types and necessary agricultural commercial support services (example grain drying facilities);

- development according to the Agricultural Code of Practice, designed to ensure a healthy separation between livestock facilities, residences and other forms of urban type development.

- a restrictive severance policy that eliminates the creation of non-farm lots and discourages so-called farm residential severances (the severance of a surplus residence, and severances for a son, daughter or a retiring farmer).

- the preservation of natural areas, recognizing their contribution to agriculture and the man-made environment.

The implementation of the *Food Land Guidelines* reflects the relationship between municipalities and the province. This relationship, based on a legal and jurisdictional framework, establishes the basis for municipal planning. Municipal corporations are not autonomous bodies, but are limited in their powers by the terms of provincial legislation. The Planning Act, for example, assigns certain authority to municipalities while retaining an overriding provincial role. Provincial involvement in municipal planning is assured through the plan review and approval process. This process ensures that due consideration is given to provincial interests (which the Planning Act defines as including the protection of the agricultural resource base) and provincially adopted policy statements. Although the *Food Land Guidelines* was never adopted as an official provincial policy statement, they were treated as such. As a result, municipal councils, local boards, provincial ministries, commissions and the Ontario Municipal Board were required to "have regard to" the *Food Land Guidelines*.

In 1986, there was an attempt to replace the Guidelines with the *Food Land Preservation Policy Statement*. Intended as a policy statement under the Planning Act, it was never adopted by the Government. This inaction reflected a number of political realities not least of which was the generally depressed state of the agricultural industry in the 1980s. At a time when many farmers faced bankruptcy and were leaving the farm it was very difficult for many rural communities to embrace a provincial initiative to protect agricultural land. It should also be noted that the province in 1988 did pass "right-to-farm" legislation known as the Farm Practices Protection Act. The impact of this legislation, however, has been
negligible for local land use planning and farmland preservation.

In June of 1991, the province announced the appointment of the Commission of Planning and Development Reform in Ontario. The Terms of Reference for this commission identified the need to inquire into, report upon and make recommendations on legislative change (Commission on Planning and Development Reform in Ontario 1993). The release of the Commission's *New Planning for Ontario: Final Report Summary and Recommendations* in June, 1993 was followed in December, 1994 by the giving of Royal Assent to Bill 163 which outlined significant revisions to the Planning Act. A key component of the revisions was a *Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements*. This document was initially released in May of 1994 and came into effect with the proclamation of Bill 163 in 1995.

The *Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements* replaced the *Food Land Guidelines* (1978) as the position of the Government of Ontario towards planning for agricultural lands. Although the agricultural policies included within the *Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements* represents a much condensed version of the *Food Land Guidelines*, significant additional information exists within the *Implementation Guideline For Agricultural Land Policies* (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs 1995).

In many respects the Agricultural Land Policies included within the *Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements* maintain the thrust of the *Food Land Guidelines*. The primary goal of the Agricultural Land Policies is to protect prime agricultural areas for long-term agricultural use and the following five key policy directions support this goal:

i) specialty crop lands and class 1-3 soils are defined as prime agricultural areas and the use of these areas is restricted to primary agriculture (crops and livestock), secondary agricultural uses (such as home occupations) and agriculture-related uses (example grain drying facilities).

ii) non-agricultural uses are not permitted within prime agricultural areas and are encouraged to locate within existing communities.

iii) lot creation within prime agricultural areas is generally discouraged and will be permitted for primary agricultural uses, surplus residences, retiring farmers, existing agriculture related uses and residential infilling.

iv) extraction of mineral aggregate is permitted on prime agricultural lands, including the potential for extraction below the water table.

v) new development and new or expanding livestock facilities will comply with the minimum distance separation formulae.

While these policies maintain the general policy direction established by the *Food Land Guidelines* they in some respects strengthen the approach to agricultural land preservation and in other ways weaken it.

*A strengthening of the provincial approach:*

The Agricultural Land Policies take a strong position towards not permitting non-agricultural uses within prime agricultural areas. While the *Food Land Guidelines* allowed non-agricultural uses, such as golf course and residential subdivisions in prime agricultural areas, if there was a documented need, the revised policy clearly attempts to preclude this activity. Moreover, the Agricultural Land Policies go beyond the *Food Land Guidelines* in attempting to protect farmland by precluding severances for farm help and by altering the severance provisions for retiring farmers, surplus residences and agriculture-related uses.
A weakening of the provincial approach:

There are several areas where the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements represent a weakening of the policy direction established by the Food Land Guidelines. For instance, the Agricultural Land Policies exclude lands rated as Class 4 by the Canada Land Inventory as part of the prime agriculture area; there is the opportunity for aggregate extraction below the water table without the need for agricultural rehabilitation and finally there is the potential for significant non-farm development as a result of the policies allowing for residential infilling within prime agriculture areas (defined as the creation of a residential lot between two existing non-farm residences on separated lots, located on the same side of the road and not more than 100 metres apart).

While the merits of these individual changes can be debated it is premature to comment on the impact of these policies. Not only can one debate whether the net effect of the policies is to strengthen or weaken the provincial approach to the preservation of farm land, one cannot conclude that the provincial government or bureaucracy has the resolve to ensure the aggressive implementation of what is essentially a top-down approach.

Coincident with the development of Bill 163 and the release of the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements the province in February, 1995 announced the Niagara Tender Fruit Lands Program (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 1995). This 10-year, $20 million program was designed to protect Niagara's tender fruit orchards from conversion to non-farm uses (75 percent of Canada's peaches and 70 percent of Ontario's cherries, pears, plums and prunes are produced in this area). Under this program an eligible tender fruit farmer could volunteer to sign an agreement called a restrictive covenant which stipulated that current and future owners would not do anything to make the land unusable for tender fruit production. In return for agreeing to the restrictive covenant, farmers received payments according to the agricultural characteristics of the farm parcel, and the threat of conversion to non-farm uses. Essentially, this covenant restricted the property to agricultural uses and precluded severances, subdivisions, non-agricultural structures, paving, commercial, industrial, institutional, recreational, and residential uses, the dumping of waste or extraction of soil or aggregate (certain exemptions exist for uses that are legitimately secondary to agriculture). Although this program that applied to a relatively small geographic area, it was the first program of its kind in Canada and represented a bold new provincial initiative. This initiative will not, however, come to fruition. Upon assuming power Ontario's newly elected conservative government decided in the summer of 1995 to cancel this program.

In some respects it is difficult to evaluate the success of provincial initiatives to protect farmland. There can be no doubt that policies in the past have had an effect, but at a provincial scale the conversion of farmland to non-farm uses has continued. While some would argue that this is inevitable, perhaps more telling are a number of examples from across the province where scattered residential development has continued relatively unabated (Ministry of Municipal Affairs 1991). While some may be optimistic that the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements will contribute to a better record in the area of farmland preservation certain of the criticism of the Food Land Guidelines can also be directed towards the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements. The Food Land Guidelines were discretionary and not absolute (they were not legislation); their successful implementation was dependent upon the cooperation of local municipalities; they were developed and often implemented in isolation of other issues within the rural community and finally there was basis to question the overall commitment of the province to food land preservation. Where the Food Land Guidelines were most successful they were accompanied by locally developed and supported municipal policy that was often more holistic, comprehensive and
restrictive than provincial policy. Moreover, the success of the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements is likely to be contingent upon a successful local approach. An example, and the focus of the balance of this paper is the approach developed and implemented within Huron County.

HURON COUNTY AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

At the local level, Huron County, located in southwestern Ontario (Figure 1) is arguably one of the most successful local jurisdictions in Canada to respond to concerns related to the loss of agricultural land and to enact programs of agricultural land preservation. The commitment to agricultural land preservation within Huron County covers a period of nearly 25 years and reflects the importance of agriculture in the local economy. The approach to agricultural land preservation, including the restricting of uses disruptive to agriculture helps to explain the overall preeminence of Huron's agricultural industry (Huron leads all Ontario counties and regional municipalities in total gross farm receipts and is among the leaders in the cash crop (soybeans, winter wheat, corn, white beans) and livestock sectors (hogs, poultry, beef and dairy cattle)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County/Regional Municipality</th>
<th>Total number of applications (1983-1992)</th>
<th>Total Number of applications per 1000 acres</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>905</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dufferin</td>
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<td>Grey</td>
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<td>Haldimand-Norfolk</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huron</td>
<td>591</td>
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<td>Kent</td>
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<td>3187</td>
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</tr>
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Table 2: Severance Applications Received by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food by County and Regional Municipality (1983-1992)
Like many parts of Ontario, Huron County has experienced pressure to see farmland converted to non-farm uses. This pressure exists in essentially four different ways, including the physical expansion of urban areas, the consumption of land through recreational and cottage development, the purchase and occupancy of farms by non-farmers and the creation of scattered rural residential development. Within Huron the required policy responses have reflected the relative significance of these four trends. In the context of Huron these trends can be reviewed as follows:

i) Although in reasonable proximity to the cities of London (population 300,000) and Kitchener-Waterloo (population 236,000) Huron has not faced extensive pressure for the conversion of farmlands associated with direct urban expansion. The largest center in Huron, the Town of Goderich, has a population of approximately 7,500 residents and the balance of Huron’s population is dispersed relatively evenly among the county’s 26 municipalities (5 towns, 5 villages, 16 townships). Although the population of the county has grown by approximately 3,500 people over the last 10 years to nearly 60,000 residents the long-term trend is one of relative stability. As a result, direct growth in the urban population has generally been accommodated within the historical boundaries of the existing built-up areas.

ii) The pastoral countryside and the Lake Huron shoreline have attracted cottagers and tourists from a number of destinations and have contributed to considerable recreational pressure (Toronto and Detroit are located approximately 2 hours drive to the east and south respectively). This development has, however, been directed to a narrow strip of land adjacent to Lake Huron. This has been controlled through the land use planning process, whereby official plans designate lands for recreational development, and zoning by-laws identify permitted recreational development.

iii) The purchase of farms by non-farmers for hobby, residential or recreational purposes can significantly reduce the land base available to farmers for food production. Although this trend does not significantly contribute to the absolute loss of farmland, the non-farm investment that tends to accompany this form of development, combined with a tendency for the land to be under utilized from the perspective of its agricultural potential (including conversions to woodlands or other related uses) can have a significant impact on the farm community.

iv) Perhaps the largest challenge for Huron County and many other rural areas in Ontario has been the response to on-going pressure for rural estate and scattered rural residential development. In many areas of Ontario this has triggered extensive severance activity producing many small residential lots in the midst of agricultural areas. Table 2, for example, identifies those counties and regional municipalities which comprise the vast majority of Southern Ontario’s agricultural heartland (Figure 1). This table is based on the total number of severance applications which have been circulated by local municipalities and received by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. It should be noted that the data does not distinguish between farm and non-farm severances, nor does the number of applications equate to approvals. Nevertheless, the data provides an excellent approximation of the relative numbers of lots created within a given area. From this data one can conclude that over a 10 year period the fewest applications per 1000 acres occurred within Huron County (.7 applications) and the largest number of applications per 1000 acres occurred in Grey County (6.2 applications).
Although there is no province-wide database documenting the creation of rural non-farm lots, data does exist for Grey County (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 1991), Huron County (County of Huron, 1991) and the Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk (Kennaeley and Smith, 1989) permitting an analysis of the impact of severance approvals. This information pertains to rural areas, excluding small hamlets and villages designated for urban development and reflects the late 1980s when severance activity was particularly high. On an annual basis, one new rural residential lot (including scattered estate residential and lots for retiring farmers) was created in Huron County per 82,400 acres, in the Norfolk area of the Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk the figure was one new lot per 4,384 acres and in Grey County one new lot was created per 1,013 acres. While there are obvious geographic (including agricultural potential) and economic differences between the three areas there are also some important similarities. All three have a significant agricultural industry, all three share a similar relative proximity to major urban centers and all three operate within the same legal limits established by provincial legislation. A review by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs (1991) into severance activity in Grey County identified the absence of a strong policy framework for decision making. In contrast the Huron approach has virtually eliminated the creation of rural non-farm residential lots. The specifics of this approach are reviewed in the following sections.

HURON COUNTY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PLANNING RESPONSE

Beginning in the late 1960s an approach to land use planning was developed in Huron that recognized the primacy of agriculture. The result in 1971 was the preparation of a county wide official plan that became the first provincially approved county official plan in Ontario. This initial document included policies for the use and development of agricultural land that generally exceeded the provincial criteria that were enacted with the provincial Food Land Guidelines several years later. Although this approach has continued to evolve the fundamental components related to agricultural land preservation have remained in place for nearly 25 years.

The approach to agricultural land preservation within Huron County is largely based on a regulatory approach. This approach includes four key components as follows:

i) The County Official Plan includes a number of important policies, but from the perspective of agricultural land preservation the most important were the policies that identified criteria for the creation of new lots. These criteria are important in that the authority to create new lots has been delegated by provincial legislation to the County and the County in turn evaluates applications for severance against policies included within the official plan. The policies included within the Huron County Official Plan generally restricted the creation of new lots to those required for agriculture. In addition, the County Official Plan permits three types of residentially related severances within rural areas. These include severances for retiring farmers, for sons or daughters who assist on the farm, and for a surplus residence acquired through farm consolidation and enlargement. Other than within recognized urban and recreational areas, the County Official Plan did not permit severances for any other residential use in the countryside. In contrast, it is not unusual to find policies elsewhere in the province that, as a matter of "right", permit one or more non-agriculturally related severances per farm.

ii) The County Official Plan provided direction to the 16 townships that stipulated that they should develop individual "secondary plans." These would be developed locally, and adopted as an amendment to the County Official Plan. The first of these secondary plans adopted in the early 1970s immediately tightened up and replaced the severance policies
within the County Official Plan. The results of this process are as follows:

- Eight townships chose to eliminate all non-farm and all farm related residential severances. This was accomplished by eliminating the provisions of the County Official Plan that had permitted severances for retiring farmers, sons and daughters and surplus residences;

- Six townships chose to eliminate all non-farm severances and limited farm related residential severances to the severance of surplus residences (subject to a number of criteria);

- One township chose to allow severances for both sons and daughters who have a legitimate interest in the farming operation and for the severance of surplus residences, and

- One township chose to retain the policies of the County Official Plan permitting the 3 types of severance previously identified. Through the relatively restrictive severance policy included within the township secondary plans the creation of new residential lots and in turn the loss of farmland through scattered rural residential development have been largely stopped.

iii) The townships, through their secondary plans and zoning by-laws have developed and implemented policy which in two separate ways, has addressed the issue of the purchase and use of farms for non-farm purposes. When a large existing farm parcel is divided into smaller parcels (for example, a 200 acre parcel is divided into separate 100 acre parcels), the policies of the plan require that both parcels comprise “viable” farm units. As a result, applications are reviewed in detail to ensure compliance with this criteria, thereby ensuring that new lots will be used for commercial agriculture. Second, the provisions of the township zoning by-law require that a new residence can be established on a vacant farm parcel only if the residence is accessory to a main agricultural use. While this approach does not guarantee that existing farm parcels with residences will not be purchased by non-farmers for non-farm purposes, it does help to minimize this activity in the farm community.

iv) Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the township plans, building upon the direction of the County Official Plan, clearly identify the importance of agriculture. Typically the 16 townships have included wording similar to the following:

“The basic principle of this Secondary Plan is to ensure the continuance of Agriculture as the long term future of the Township. In order to achieve this goal, this Plan will have to promote agricultural development and support those land uses compatible with agriculture while preventing those land uses which are not” (County of Huron, Department of Planning and Development, Township of McKillop Secondary Plan, 1986).

The significance of this wording lies in the overall tone and direction it provides to the municipal planning documents. If conversions of land to uses other than agriculture are contemplated they must be evaluated against this basic principle.

COMPONENTS OF THE HURON APPROACH

While the above approach to agricultural land preservation within Huron County is largely regulatory, there are several key elements that help to explain the basis for its successful implementation and overall acceptance. Although some of the success of the Huron approach relates to the overall importance of agriculture within the local economy, it is also evident that much of the success relates to the planning process which has been pursued. A review of key components of this process helps to explain why both the selection and imple-
mentation of policy at the municipal level has been so supportive of agricultural land preservation. These key components are as follows:

i) The Legal Framework: Clearly, the legal and jurisdictional framework that allows the restrictive and regulatory approach to be pursued is a key consideration helping to explain the overall success of the Huron approach. This restrictive approach while recognizing the public’s right to appeal local planning decisions to the Ontario Municipal Board (an impartial quasi-judicial board that has the authority to review and change local planning decisions), fundamentally recognizes the need to plan and implement plans in the public interest. This is a reflection of the fact that the state, under the 1982 constitution, retains the right to demand reasonable land use from its citizens. Flowing from this, is the authority for Canadian communities to constrain, through regulation, the uses made of all land within the community (Hodge, 1991). While this is an important component of the Huron approach, it does not explain the differences that exist between Huron and other jurisdictions in terms of the approach to agricultural land preservation.

ii) Public Participation and Education: The development of planning documents in Huron has been based on substantial public involvement. The development of individual township plans, for example, followed a lengthy process of: kitchen meetings, workshops and public meetings (Wolfe, 1979). In total, prior to the adoption of the township plan by local council, the public will have had as many as 15 to 20 opportunities to attend a public gathering to discuss planning issues and influence the development of planning policy. Moreover, the draft plan is circulated to the public for review and consideration.

This lengthy and involved process has tremendous educational potential. The public, council and planners all have the opportunity to share information and understanding. Experience at these meetings reveals that the public can provide considerable insight into the issue of agricultural land preservation. While there is a range of opinions associated with an issue such as severance policy, there is a clear understanding of the importance of this issue to the rural community. As noted earlier, this process has produced planning documents which are very supportive of agriculture and the preservation of farmland. It should be noted that in total, out of 16 townships, the severance policies of only one plan have been appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board. This tends to endorse both the overall public support for the agricultural policy direction of the local plans, and the ability to reach consensus through public participation and education.

While some might argue that the township plans were developed during the 1970s and early 1980s when the agricultural community was more buoyant and therefore supportive of protecting farmlands, it should be noted that there continues to be support for the overall program. Although there are differing opinions concerning the protection of farmlands, a 1991 survey of the Huron public conducted by the Huron County Department of Planning and Development continued to note the need to protect prime agricultural land (County of Huron 1992).

iii) Community Development: While the protection of prime farmland has remained a constant, the focus of the Huron County Department of Planning and Development has continued to evolve. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the Department has increasingly focused its efforts on issues which were prevalent in the rural community. Rural restructuring and the loss of business and employment encouraged the County, through the efforts of the Department of Planning and Development, to
pursue community economic development. This approach has helped to maintain a degree of optimism in the local economy and, given the relatively depressed state of agriculture, it has helped to convince elected officials and the public to leave planning policy relatively unchanged. At the same time many other areas have attempted to make their planning documents more 'severance permissive'.

iv) Local Commitment to Implementation: In the final analysis the overall commitment of the public, elected officials and planners to the development and implementation of planning policy which is supportive of the protection of agricultural land is the most important factor explaining the success of the Huron approach. This local commitment reflects a number of factors. First, the overall emphasis on public participation has produced an informed electorate which has had a substantial impact on policy development. While the protection of farmland at the provincial or national level is obviously a priority, the participation of the local community helped to create the community dialogue which identified the wisdom of farmland protection from the perspective of area farmers. The recognition of the dominance of agriculture in the local community, combined with an appreciation of the potential influence of substantial non-farm intrusion into the rural community has contributed to considerable support. Second, the overall jurisdictional arrangement including a strong county presence through the County Official Plan, combined with the opportunity for the local development and promotion of township plans has contributed to an environment in which the county and local municipalities have generally proceeded in a spirit of cooperation as opposed to one of animosity. This relationship between the county and local municipalities has contributed to local support, willing participation and commitment to implementation that has advanced the overall goal of protecting farmlands.

CONCLUSIONS

The preservation of farmland within the province of Ontario has been supported by the provincial government since the mid-1970s. The Food Land Guidelines, and its successor - the Comprehensive Set of Policy Statements have and continue to provide a reasonable framework for municipal initiatives in the protection of farmland. There are, however, criticisms. Some have argued that the provincial approach does not adequately reflect regional differences in the agricultural community; that it focuses too much on farmland protection as opposed to the protection of farms and the rural community; and finally, that it has a relatively narrow focus, that combined with a somewhat selective implementation has within some communities created a backlash against provincial policy.

When the County of Huron embarked upon a program of land use planning in the late 1960s the protection of farmland was not a major issue within rural Ontario. As planning documents were developed within Huron County it was recognized, however, that it was in the best interest of the rural community to establish policies to encourage the protection of the farming industry. There were sufficient examples from across the province of where the agricultural industry had been sacrificed in the interest of urban expansion to provide local support for this direction. The threat to farmland within Huron County has not, however, been the expansion of urban areas but rather the cumulative impact of many small scattered rural residential lots. By largely controlling this activity, planning within Huron County has helped to protect not only farmland but also the rights, options and flexibility of the individual farm operator.

Based on the experience of the province of Ontario and the County of Huron, several general conclusions or recommendations can
be identified which pertain to the preservation of farmland:

i) The involvement of the provincial government is important to provide a province-wide policy framework. This framework should provide policy direction, build upon local initiative, incorporate some opportunity for flexibility, recognize regional differences and clearly indicate the provincial response in those instances where local activity does not support provincial initiatives.

ii) A regulatory approach to agricultural land preservation can be a very effective tool. The success of this approach will, however, be fundamentally based in the support that is received from the public, elected officials and planners.

iii) Public participation in the planning process is important to ensure that there are local discussions concerning the merits of preserving farmland. Based on the Huron experience, it is from this local debate that there is the greatest probability of local support. This is essential to ensure a local commitment to the preservation of farmland.

iv) The actual preservation of farmland is only one component of a successful approach to rural and agriculturally oriented land use planning. It is important to recognize that agriculture includes more than land and buildings. It includes the support infrastructure, service centers and the rural community.

v) Finally, there is a need to recognize that in a difficult economic climate it is important that there be a community focus on other economic issues. It is difficult for the rural community to support the preservation of farmland in a depressed economic climate. The approach to community economic development that has been pursued within the County of Huron is an appropriate vehicle to help formulate a local community response to economic change (Caldwell, 1992).

One of the most difficult challenges for rural planning in the next century will be to maintain relevancy in light of major agricultural change. While rural and agricultural Canada is experiencing economic difficulties, further change as a result of continuing high levels of production, fluctuating commodity prices and altered trading arrangements is expected. Although in the mid 1990's there is an apparent resurgence in the price for certain commodities, the cumulative effect of a changing agricultural industry will be further change both at the farm and community level. Within Huron County, the issue of agricultural land preservation is recognized as one of many important issues that needs to be addressed. The willingness of the County to tackle other economic issues within the rural community has helped to ensure that sacrificing the principle of farmland preservation is not seen as the solution for the economic difficulties of the agricultural industry.

REFERENCES


