

Farmland preservation advocates push for county support

Group offers resolutions to adopt federal program

FARM will hold a public meeting at 7 p.m. Oct. 17 at the South Middle School auditorium, 500 East Parkway St.

INFO about the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, and to learn more about FARM, go to monfarm05@yahoo.com. To contact the Mon County Commission, call 291-7257.

UPDATE

BY GARY GRAY

The Dominion Post

A group of Monongalia County farmers has sent drafts of two resolutions to county commissioners that, if adopted, would help preserve farmland from future development.

FARM, or Farmers and Residents for saving Monongalia County Farms, wants the county to implement the USDA Farm and

Ranchland Protection Program.

The program would use funds from an additional tax on property transfers to pay for a county board. That board would purchase development rights to properties. Only those purchasing property would pay.

The program also is an option for farmers, not a rule. Farmers would maintain ownership of the land, but the land would be restricted to agricultural use only.

Since 2003, the group has been trying to persuade the three-mem-

ber Mon County Commission to form a county-level board that would focus on controlling urban expansion and funding for farmland preservation.

So far, two of the three commissioners have remained tentative about initiating the program.

Commissioner John Pyles said he supports the program but would like to see some estimates of how much money would be collected.

"I do have a few questions, but

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FARMLAND

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the concept is good," he said. "I think we need to look at it seriously, and I would be inclined to approve it."

Barbara Fleischauer, an attorney who represented Mon County in the West Virginia House of Delegates from 1994 to 2004, has been pushing for the program since 2002.

"We're losing at least 12 farms a year in Mon County, and once it's gone, it's gone," she said. "This is a federal program, but it had to be set up at the state level to get down to the counties."

Fleischauer, FARM'S co-chair, sponsored legislation in 2000-2001 to implement the plan in West Virginia.

From 1997 to 2002, the number of farms in Mon County dropped by 63, from 541 to 478, according to the 2002 National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Commissioner Asel Kennedy said he sympathizes with farmers but hasn't seen enough public support to back the program.

"We asked the group to drum up some support, but in the last four months I've probably talked to about

five or six people about it," Kennedy said. "It's probably not a bad idea. But at this point, we just haven't heard from enough people."

Commissioner Bob Bell said he is familiar with what FARM is trying to do but has not heard from anyone with the group recently.

"I haven't changed my position on this," he said. "I still feel like we need to hear from a lot more people."

J.R. Wolfe, a USDA district conservationist in Morgantown and FARM adviser, said the drafts given to commissioners are actual resolutions that have passed legal tests in other counties.

"This has already been done in about a dozen counties, so we didn't need to reinvent the wheel here," he said.

Under the USDA program, the county commission of each eligible county can charge an additional tax on property transfers to be used solely for the program. Mon County residents already pay a tax of \$4.40 per \$1,000 on property transfers.

FARM has asked that the county charge the maximum additional rate allowed: \$2.20 per \$1,000.

That would bring the total tax per \$1,000 to \$6.60, which equates

to a \$990 property transfer fee on the purchase of a \$150,000 house.

So far, 15 West Virginia counties have approved the plan and established boards to administer the program. Of these, 10 counties are applying the additional property-transfer tax.

Since 2002, when West Virginia counties started using the program, 24 farms totaling about 3,000 acres have been protected at a cost of about \$7 million.

Mark Matheny, an active member of the group, raises cattle on several farms outside Morgantown. His parents moved to a farm when he was 10 years old, and that's when his views on preserving the land took shape.

"Today I can stand on my parents' farm and look in every direction and see developments that used to be farmland," he said. "You never hear about homes and businesses being torn down to build farms, it's always the other way around."

Matheny said the preservation program is not for everyone, but he'd like the option to be there.

"I would not be for it if it were just rezoning," he said. "This is a totally voluntary thing."