Land Use and Agriculture

The first article that caught my eye for this week’s readings was the one entitled “Land use: Proposal protects farmland.” The article talks about the fact that a great number of acres of farmland is being lost every second due to development and urban sprawl. The article states that Michigan is losing farmland at an astonishing rate of 10 acres an hour which translates into almost three townships of land each year. The land is being used to develop new factories, big box stores and of course, housing. The addition on new housing on farmland has been termed urban sprawl. Back home, this was a huge issue while I was growing up. Lapeer County is far enough from the big cities of Detroit and Flint in that it still has farmland but close enough to commute to these cities. While attending school, the system added about 100 kids each year, which was a huge increase for this area. This was brought on by little suburbs that would pop up in a corn field or huge houses that would take over a field that previously housed sugar beets. Urban sprawl became a huge issue and something that was always on people’s minds.

Growing up on a farm and being part of a farming community, I grew up disliking the people that were “destroying” farmland. Although I am still against building a huge suburb in a corn field, the problem has basically vanished in our area for now. With the economic slowdown, people can’t afford to move out into the country and pay to build houses. In fact, many of these houses that were built within the last few years are now up for sale. Many people wouldn’t look at the slowdown as a good thing for the community, but one thing it has done that I see as a positive is keep farmland and open space from being turned into housing and retail stores.
In the ten years of the urban sprawl in my area, the number of houses on the five mile road that I live on almost doubled. An 80 acre field would be sold to a large construction company which would in turn separate the land into lots and then build a whole bunch of houses and sell them to people that would move up from the city. Also lots of time people from the city would buy a lot and then build their own house. This was economically good for the community because construction companies were doing well and provided a lot of direct and indirect jobs for the community. Our county, Lapeer County, grew very fast during this time and I saw our county go from about 50,000 to about 80,000 people. Once again, there were political and economic benefits but losing all the land to development in my mind was not worth it.

The article talks about how communities can stop the housing and development. The process includes the state buying the development rights of farmland and in turn the land must be used for agricultural purposes for a set number of years. The main problem of this program is funding. The article states that in the past few years the state spent about $27 million to buy development rights for 14,400 acres. However there are more than 125,000 more acres that farmers are willing to put into the program. However the state does not and will not put any more money into the program and it is taking years and years for land rights to be bought on land that has been on a waitlist for years. Because the state has not stepped up to the plate on this issue, communities are trying to take the responsibility of preserving farmland into their own hands. After all, it is imperative to keep farmland in production to keep Americans fed.

In fact, Lapeer County tried to implement a mileage three years ago that would collect money for a program that would buy up development rights on parks and farmland. The stipulation for parks was added to attract more voters to vote yes on the ballot proposal. Surprisingly, the proposal failed with a 2-1 margin. Even though the campaign for a yes vote was
unopposed and had good funding, the people still decided to vote no and virtually leave farmland open for further development, which creates future uncertainty in the agriculture market. Our farm was put on the list several years ago and still has not been funded. I think this will be the trend for the next several years until the state and population realize how important farmland is to the state. In my mind, there is nothing more important we can do to secure a safe and capable food supply for America’s future.