

**McHenry County Regional Planning Commission**  
**AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**  
**March 28, 2007**

**CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL:** Chairman Bauman called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. Members present: Ron Bauman, Jeremy Shaw, Frank Harrison and Charlie Eldredge. Members absent: none. Staff present: SuzAnne Ehardt, Matt Hansel and Jean Hervert Niemann.

**MINUTES:** Minutes from 2-28-07 were approved by consensus.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:** James McNutt (MCRCP), RB Thompson (MCRPC), Bill Swenson (MCRPC), Tim Kane (Chicago Tribune), Dan Volkers (McHenry County Farm Bureau Manager), Ken Bauman (MCFB member), Mark Martin (Interior Tropical Gardens), Mary McCann (MCB and McCann Strawberry Farm), John Jung (MCB), and Dan Ziller Jr. (Ziller Farms).

**DISCUSSION ITEMS:** Chairman Bauman handed out a list of 11 questions related to the future of farming in McHenry County. The first question asked for comments on obstacles to farming in the county. Farm equipment access to remote farm field locations was a concern because of large equipment size and conflict between slow moving equipment and fast-paced traffic. In some parts of the county posted weight limits restrict farmers' access to deliver products to market.

The cost of land in McHenry County is another obstacle to farming. To make a return on an investment in land, a farmer can only afford to pay \$4,000 to \$5,000 per acre for good agricultural land (prime agricultural soils). Currently, it is common to pay at least \$8,000 to \$10,000 per acre for farm land in McHenry County and in some areas such as Coral Township agricultural land is selling for more than \$25,000 per acre. Frank Harrison's review of land sales of 40 acres or more of farm land to be used for farming in the western half of the county revealed an average price of \$11,000 per acre. Dan Volkers commented that 1031 land purchases have not been as frequent in recent years.

Other obstacles to farming are the urban/rural conflict, the potential for nuisance lawsuits and the fact that the average age of farmers in McHenry County is increasing. In other words, fewer young people are choosing to farm. High health insurance premiums for farm families is a major expense that results in at least one family member seeking employment off the farm just to be able to get health insurance benefits.

Policies could be developed to help farming in McHenry County in the following areas: preserving the most productive soils in the county; strengthening drainage laws; developing a farmland conservation program; limiting new subdivisions to areas near municipal services; offering density credits to residential developments that buy conservation easements and thereby preserve farmland; and requiring reverse setback for subdivisions near agricultural intensive uses.

At several points throughout the meeting there was discussion about the McHenry County Conservation District's purchase of farmland. The consensus of the subcommittee was to encourage joint cooperation between the Farm Bureau and the McHenry County Conservation Foundation to develop a procedure to allow MCCD to acquire just the land having natural areas or recreational significance and place a conservation easement on the remaining land that could be sold and farmed.

A discussion of changes affecting farming in the county in the last several years included increasing land prices and a decrease in farm representation on the County Board and at hearings on rezoning farmland to residential uses. Many people moved to McHenry County because of its rural atmosphere and now find that they are surrounded by suburban sprawl.

Goals that the Agriculture subcommittee may want to include in the plan are working with the state legislature to change state laws to be more supportive of agriculture in general and give some incentives to land in Agricultural Districts, limiting residential growth around intensive agricultural uses, working cooperatively to establish conservation easements on agricultural land, promoting agritourism and encouraging residential land uses near municipalities instead of "leap frog" pattern of growth.

Dan Volkens offered to send a questionnaire to the voting members of the Farm Bureau this spring and include questions from this subcommittee. Dan expects that the survey process would take 3 months if planning staff could help tabulate results. Chairman Bauman suggested using the questions handed out at the beginning of the meeting as a starting place for the questionnaire.

The meeting adjourned at 10:35 p.m.