

Introduction

The preservation of farmland in America has become a growing concern across the nation for both farmers and urban residents alike. The trend surrounding towns and cities has been an increasingly high turnover of farmland into residential subdivisions and strip malls. The negative effect of this on farmland is multiplied when the development sprawls out into the rural area in a random manner. Vacant locations near urban areas are left untouched while rural farmland is taken out of production. Ultimately, the characteristic of the rural area will diminish as more adjacent farmland is converted to non-farm uses.

The location of new residential, commercial and industrial development needs to be encouraged in areas near existing development, areas where utilities plan to be extended, and areas that do not contain prime agricultural soils. Planning future locations of public utilities near existing development and away from prime agricultural soils, can help deter the attractiveness of rural farmland and guide development to planned growth areas.

Historically, the agriculture industry has been important to the culture and economy of Cumberland County. Agriculture is dependent on the quality of the soil, and Cumberland County is recognized as having some of the most productive soils in Pennsylvania.

The Soil Survey has established capability classes for soils and are designated by Roman numerals I through VIII. The higher the numeral, the greater the limitations for agricultural use. The classes are defined as follows:

Class I - few limitations that restrict their use

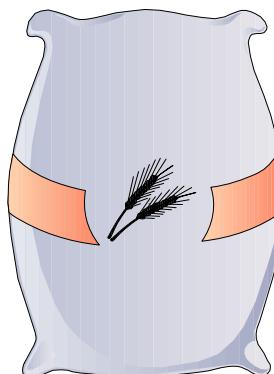
Class II - moderate limitations that require moderate conservation practices

Class III - Severe limitations that require special conservation practices

Class IV-VIII - very severe limitations that require careful management or are unsuitable for cultivation.

“Prime Farmland” has been defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as “land that is best suited to producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and water supply need to economically produce a sustained yield of crops when it is treated and managed using acceptable farming methods.”

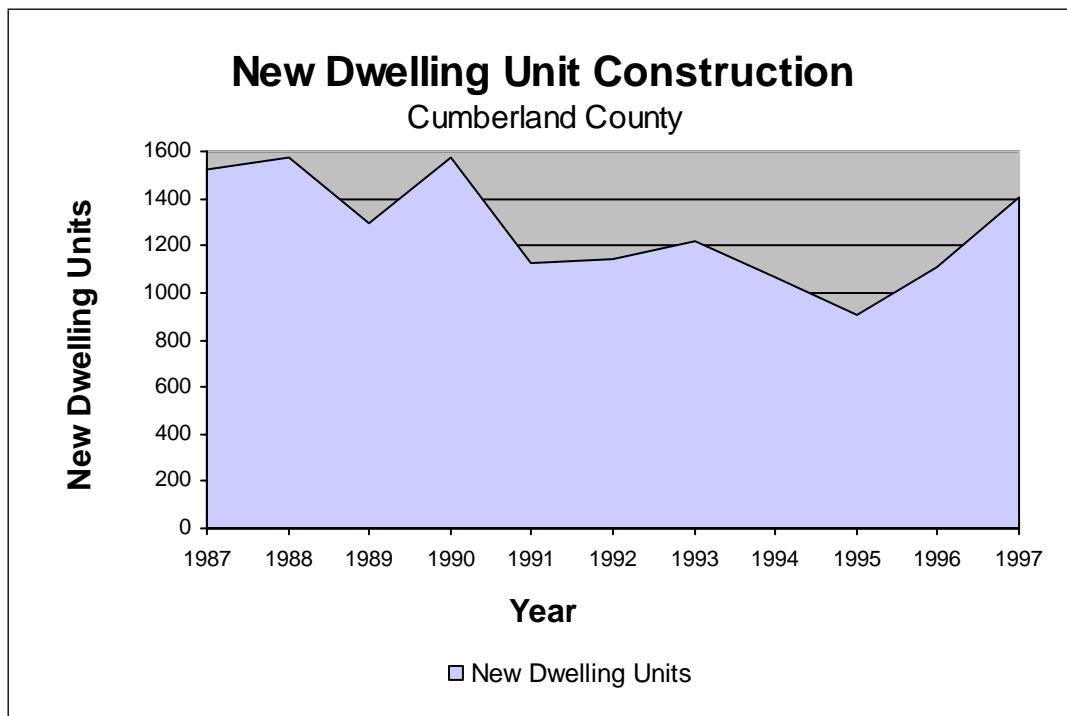
Prime Farmland in Cumberland County includes Class I and Class II soils. Approximately 110,000 acres or 31% of the County’s land area is defined as prime farmland according to the Soil Survey of Cumberland County, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Much of this prime agricultural land is composed of material weathered from limestone and is found generally across the Center of the County, between the Conodoguinet and Yellow Breeches Creeks. (Map - 1)



Cumberland County also has an enormous amount of land that falls within the category of Class III soils, which is either currently farmed or undeveloped. Although these soils may not be considered “prime farmland,” they significantly contribute to the agricultural production of the County. Approximately 60% of Cumberland County is covered with productive soils in the categories of Class I, II, and III soils.

As indicated above, Cumberland County has an abundance of productive farmland with significant amount classified as prime farmland. These productive soils are generally located in the open, level valley areas. It is these same characteristics that attract development and leads to conflict between agriculture and residential development.

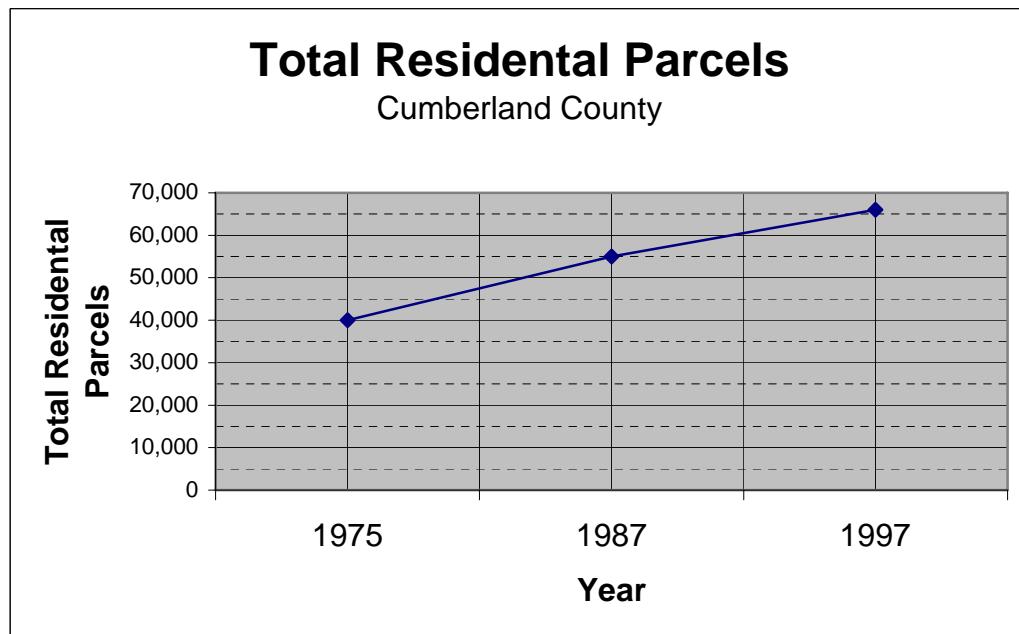
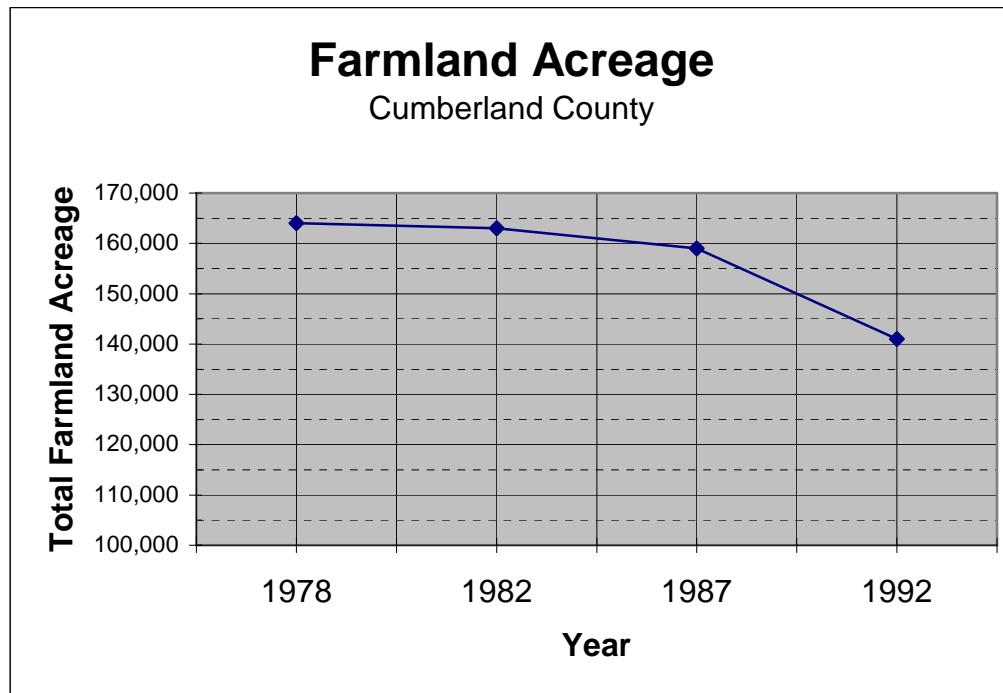
It is obvious to anyone traveling across Cumberland County that farmland is being lost. During the last decade new home construction has remained fairly constant, averaging 1,268 new residences a year. The highest year was 1990 with the issuance of 1,576 building permits for new residential construction.



Some of this new construction is occurring in the eastern, developed portion of the County and not impacting farmland. But a substantial amount of the construction is occurring in the County’s central and western regions and is not serviced with public sewer and water. As a result, large lots are being created (usually larger than one acre per single family home) in order to meet the State requirements for on-site sewage disposal. As the trend continues, the region eventually loses its agricultural character and develops as a suburban one. This transition usually happens gradually, over the course of generations. Its impact is usually not perceived until viewed through

hindsight. A good example is the eastern portion of Cumberland County. If in 1945, a County resident had been told that in 50 years there would be only a handful of farms east of Mechanicsburg, their reaction would probably have been disbelief.

The following graphs demonstrate Cumberland County's current trends and relationship between total residential parcels and agricultural acreage.



Cumberland County is experiencing problems similar to many other parts of America. Due to its location near Harrisburg, a portion of the county has already been completely developed. Outside of this developed area, is a region where large lot residential subdivisions and strip commercial development are occurring. The remainder of the county continues to be predominantly rural, although a number of sparsely located farms have been converted into residential lots. It is this rural area in which the Cumberland County Agricultural Preservation Board has concentrated its interest in farmland preservation.

The Agricultural Preservation Board, with the assistance of Tri-County Regional Planning Commission has developed this document as a tool to assist municipalities in enacting effective farmland preservation methods. This document will examine five methods, through the use of zoning, that are designed to preserve farmland. A model ordinance will also be provided for the most effective methods. In addition to zoning, there are other tools available that promote the preservation of agricultural land. These will also be discussed.