The Challenge

The only constant in life is change. The question is, what kind of change do we want and how do we achieve it. If there are values we wish to preserve, then we must consciously plan to achieve their preservation. This is particularly true for those who wish to preserve our rural landscapes. These are being threatened by urban sprawl, the growth of non-farm rural housing on septic and well taking place along our rural roadways. Scattered leap frog development of residential subdivisions also create land use conflicts, disrupt and displace agricultural operations, and create inefficient land use patterns and costly provision of public services and utilities.

In the Chicago metropolitan area, suburban growth and rural sprawl are the character of development resulting from change over the last 50 years. The change is from the growth of population seeking the opportunities of the region. The character of the change, that is, of the development resulting from population increase, is too often driven only by a developer’s decisions that are based on short term economics. These decisions seldom consider whether they contribute to the common good nor to long term social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Human beings are unique in many ways. They are not bound by instinct. (An instinct is a programmed perception that calls into play a programmed reaction. Animals are not moved by what they cannot react to. They live in a tiny world, a sliver of reality, one neuro-chemical program that keeps them walking behind their nose and shuts out everything else.” p 52 The Denial of Death by Ernest Becker.) We, as human beings, can look around us and formulate courses of action to solve and avoid what we see as problems, meet future needs, and lay hold of positive opportunities consistent with our values, our goals and objectives.

For those who value our countryside, and who have concern about the future of our rural landscapes, prime farmland and rural communities, there are positive things that can be done, by government and by individuals. But first, consider the following:

- First of all the image of the landscape reflects the reality of how we use the land, and of the history, economics, politics and life styles of the people in an area. A key fact is that some of the richest and most productive farmland in the entire world is in the Chicago region and surrounding major cities in the US. This is a limited resource, unique to a few regions throughout the globe and vital to the production of food for future generations.

- Secondly, the number of farms is declining and few children of farm families
choose to continue the family farm. In order to obtain cash for retirement, they seek to sell the land to the highest bidder. This means for development rather than farming in many instances. In the Chicago region, both history and logical projections anticipate continued expansion of urban uses. Look at the pattern over the last 50 years! In 100 years we could be urbanized from Lake Michigan to the Rock River, or for that matter to the Mississippi!

I would suggest that there are two central questions which we can address through intelligent planning and design. Where should growth occur, and, what pattern and quality of planning and design should it follow.

**What Can We Do?**

My answer to the first is that on a regional basis, large tracts of prime farmland should be set aside for agricultural preservation in perpetuity. This can be achieved through agricultural zoning, purchase of development rights and conservation easements.

On the second question, development of housing, shopping and industry should be focused adjacent to existing small communities with sewer, water, schools, emergency services, mail, snow plowing, libraries and all of the supporting community services in proximity. Small communities should identify the best areas for such development contiguous with the existing built up area of the community and avoid leap frog development.

Focusing development around existing communities and preserving agricultural land from rural sprawl, rural non-farm housing on large lots with septic and well, reduces conflicts between residential and agricultural uses and lowers the costs of public services significantly. It helps to revitalize our rural communities and preserve our rural landscapes.

We are not creating new county roadways. By permitting one lot deep development along rural highways we are not only destroying the rural landscape but creating traffic conflicts, plus, huge costs for servicing these scattered developments, not the least of which is the financial and environmental cost of the use of petroleum resources. A very small number of rural non-farm homes can create an exponentially high negative impact on the character of the landscape and the cost of public services.

And commercial development without defined points of access and proper setbacks, particularly at intersections, is also to be avoided. When there is a legitimate rural business, then, plan for safe access off of and onto the roadway with adequate parking.

When residential development does occur, preserve trees along the roadway, wood
lots, fencerows. Farmers should also be encouraged to maintain these areas rather than “clear cutting” to increase tillable acreage. These vegetated areas reduce wind erosion, provide wildlife habitat and contribute to the natural character of the landscape.

Wetlands and stream corridors for buffers between agricultural operations and homes, will help to protect water quality, reduce storm water run-off, provide wildlife habitat and, preserve the character of the landscape. Establish minimum standards for setbacks and preservation of existing natural features through Zoning and Sub-division Ordinances.

Case Study

Encourage residential development to use cluster open space design. This is a preliminary plat for a traditional subdivision in Algonquin, Illinois. See Figure 1. Compare it with a cluster open space plan for the same area, now called Manchester Lakes, which was implemented. See Figure 2. This alternative plan has deep landscaped setbacks along the perimeter for a more rural character (even in a suburban situation) as well as for the quiet and privacy of the residents. Nearly 5 miles of recreational trails link all sections of the neighborhood to each other, commercial and church sites on the perimeter and to a 26 acre regional park on the south end, built around wetlands. Approximately 50 percent of the site is in permanent open space and more than 90 percent of all of the homes back out onto attractive detention ponds or the common open space with its trail system. The result; the same number of people as in a conventional subdivision, occupying less land with more natural resources and open space preserved in perpetuity.

For those who believe in the importance of preserving our rural landscape and prime farm land, those who want to see new life breathed into our rural communities, I suggest that you support local leaders and conservation groups who share these goals!

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Figure 2
Implemented Plan