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MICHIGAN FARMER

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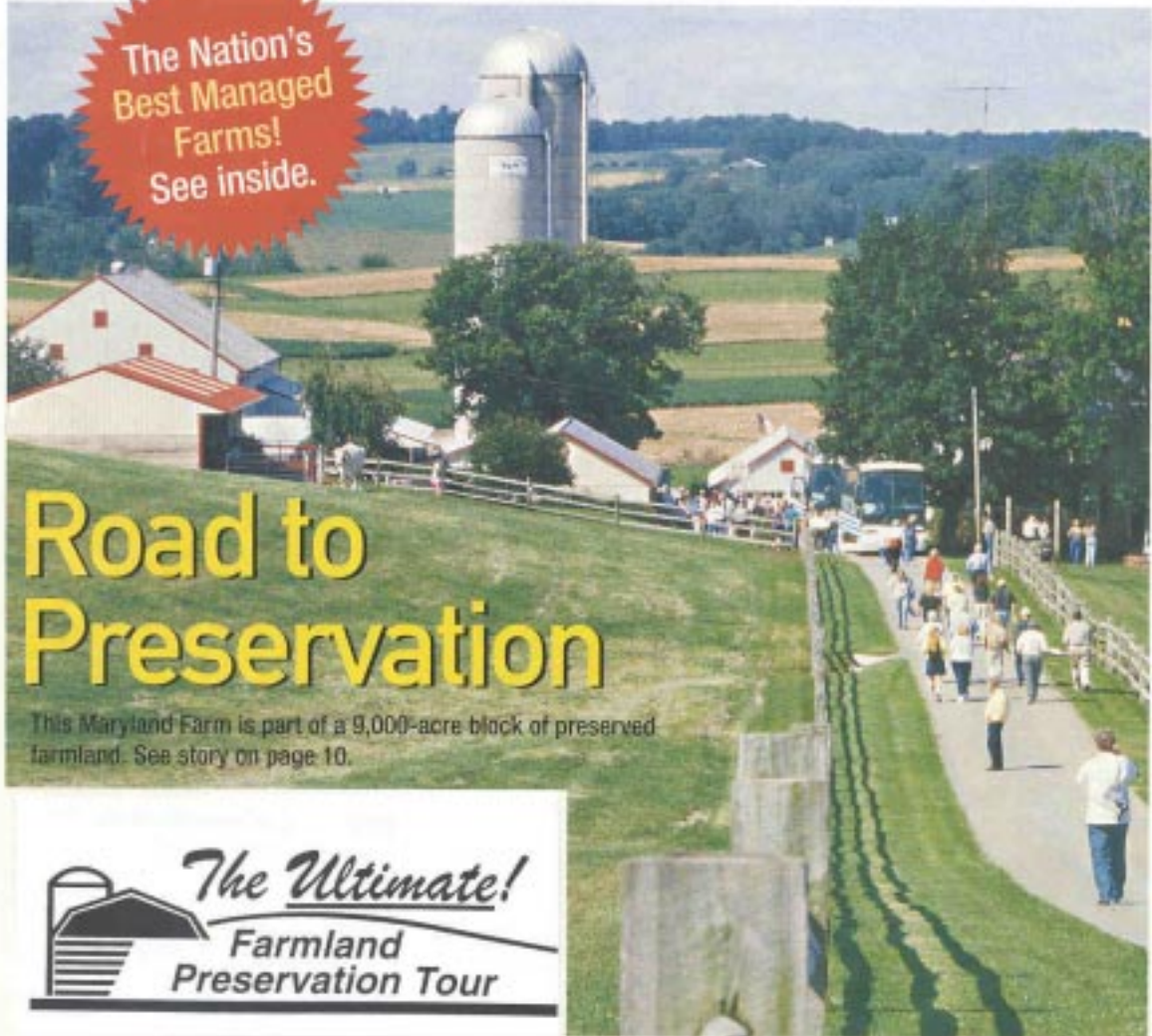
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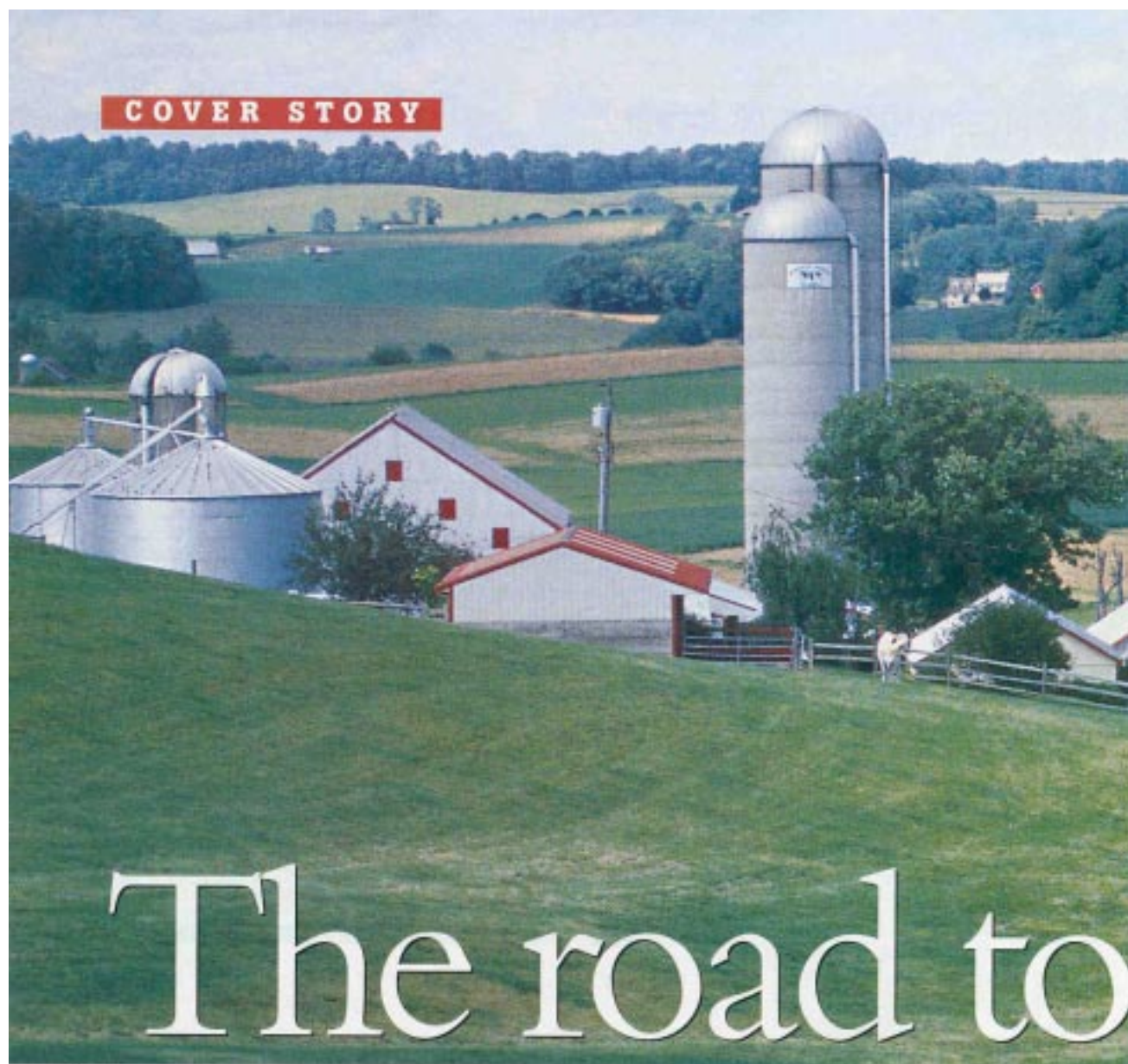
The Nation's
Best Managed
Farms!
See inside.

Road to Preservation

This Maryland Farm is part of a 9,000-acre block of preserved farmland. See story on page 10.

 *The Ultimate!*
Farmland
Preservation Tour





The road to



David Skjoerlund explains how Maryland established a program to transfer development rights from rural to urban areas.

The Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tour took Michigan farmers and community leaders to the East Coast to see farmland-preservation efforts there. ■ By Beth Stuever.

Dwight Hess' Lancaster County, Penn., farm has been in the family since the 1920s. Until recently it remained nameless. Four years ago, he and his family decided to give it an identity. It didn't take them long to settle on PleasantView Farms.

"Pleasant" is an understatement when you consider that the Hess farm is nestled among thousands of acres of contiguous farmland in the most productive nonirrigated agricultural county in the United States. Thanks to an aggressive farmland protection program it will stay that way.



preservation

In 1992, Hess sold the development rights on his 140-acre homestead through a county-administered government program in order to benefit from the equity in his land without sacrificing the acreage to builders and real estate developers. He is currently in the process of protecting even more of his land.

"This is one of the most productive pieces of farmland in the area," Hess says. "More important, it's where my roots are. It was important to me that this land stay in agriculture. The view wouldn't be nearly as pleasant if I were staring at stacks of houses."

Hess' farm is just one-half mile from Maytown, a small, but growing burgh of 2,500 people. But unlike farmers in Michigan struggling with encroaching building pressures, Hess doesn't have to worry about Maytown getting any closer to his homestead. "All the land between here and the village is protected," he says. "Maytown can grow, but not in this direction."

Organizations in Michigan are hoping to bring this preservation strategy home by creating county- and township-specific programs. Pleasant View Farms is just one stop on what has become an annual trek for farmers,

county and township officials and task force volunteers who want to mimic this approach in the Midwest.

To date more than 650 people from Michigan, Ohio and Indiana have visited successful preservation areas in Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania on the Ultimate Farmland Preservation Tour. There, participants peruse thousands of contiguous acres of protected farmland by bus to learn how local East Coast entities make the programs work.

David Skjaerlund, director of the Rural Development Council of Michigan
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gan, a division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA), helped organize tours along with Scott Everett, director of the Central Great Lakes Region for American Farmland Trust. Skjaerlund has a "can-do" attitude when it comes to farmland preservation. "In the last 15 years, Michigan has lost more than a million of acres of farmland to development," he says. "In 1998, we decided that we'd talked about it enough. We needed to show people how it works in other states and can be done here in Michigan."

What began as a quest to take a few agricultural leaders on the trip, soon turned into two busloads of volunteers anxious to learn and bring back ideas to Michigan. Since then, Skjaerlund has helped arrange five more tours with as many as 180 participants at a time.

FOUR IN THE FOREFRONT

When it comes to farmland preservation in Michigan, four groups stand in the forefront: Skjaerlund's Rural Development Council of Michigan, American Farmland Trust, Michigan Farm Bureau and the Michigan Farmland and Community Alliance. All four organizations are working toward improving an infrastructure that makes it easier for farmers to do business, as well

as easing development pressures. "The inside game is to accommodate redevelopment of urban areas," Skjaerlund says. "The outside game ensures there is a long-term business environment for agriculture."

The land-use trends and Right to Farm legislation directly impact the long-term business environment. "Will farmers make the investment in their operations if they think they will be booted out by development?" Skjaerlund asks. "My guess is no."

PLAN SMART

"Smart growth" has become the buzz phrase of farmland preservation advocates who say the way to keep agri-



Jason Myers sold his development rights to protect his family's agricultural interests.

Land at Pleasant View Farms is part of the 50,000 acres in Lancaster County that will remain permanently in agriculture.



culture viable is to institute a plan to purchase development rights on agricultural land. While Skjaerlund admits some development is necessary, he says encouraging sustainable development while maintaining the resource base that is economically important to agriculture is key. "We do that by focusing on education, partnership building, leadership development and technical assistance to communities."

According to Everett, it is imperative that everyone understands the programs. "Farmers, state legislators and local officials must all work together to address these challenges," he says. "That's why we encourage a diverse group to join us on the trip. Once people see the results of good, solid planning, urban development and redevelopment combined with a farmland protection tool, they begin to understand the importance for future generations."

MAKE COMMUNITY DECISIONS

Everett says communities need to take a hard look at the value of farmland on a local level. "Local communities have to decide whether they want to make an investment in long-term agriculture," he says. "In many of the areas we tour in the northeast, it boils down to economics — communities value farmland because they don't have to spend a lot of money maintaining it. However, you have to look at the whole picture, including environmental attributes and wildlife habitats."

Everett says the first step for a community is deciding just how much value they put on their agricultural economy. "American Farmland Trust, MDA and Farm Bureau can't decide how much land should be preserved in a particular community. The community has to make that decision," he says. "We can give them the tools they need to make that decision, but we can't make it for them. What we can tell them is that if they don't take action to control the development, it will take over. They have to decide if that is what they want as a community."

Funding is the major stumbling block in making farmland preservation a reality in Michigan. Funding sources in other states vary from real



This view from the back of Windsor Manor demonstrates how farmland remains in tact when it is protected. Thanks to PDRs and TDRs, this land will never be threatened by development.

estate transfer taxes and farmland conversion fees to cigarette tax revenues, but bonds are the most common source. Currently, lien funds from Public Act 116 are being used as seed money to for Purchase of Development Rights in Michigan. But most agree that is only a temporary fix. Additional funds will be needed to ensure success.

In June, Michigan legislators passed Public Act 262, which created an agricultural preservation fund that will provide grants to communities for local farmland-preservation programs. This was part of a package of bills that also eliminated the pop-up tax and created 10 additional tax-free renaissance zones for agricultural processing facilities in Michigan. Jim Fuerstenau, director of the Michigan Farmland and Community Alliance, believes this is a good start, but more work needs to be done.

BUILD A FUNDING BASE

"First and foremost, we need to continue to pursue funding for the ag preservation fund," he says, adding that the Alliance and Michigan Farm Bureau are working to develop the partnerships necessary fund the program. "Without a strong funding base, interested farmland owners and commu-

nities will be limited from the standpoint of having a practical option for developing a strategic approach to farmland preservation."

Fuerstenau and his group are also hoping to streamline the platting process to encourage development in areas with adequate infrastructure, thereby forcing developers to gravitate toward urban areas and away from farmland.

Critics of some of the East Coast programs choose not to participate on the basis of unwanted government intervention. That's why advisors warn that the path toward successful farmland preservation will be long and arduous.

In Lancaster County, Penn., touted as one of the most successful farmland preservation areas in the country, the process took nearly 20 years. However, nearly 50,000 acres of farmland is permanently protected in Lancaster County alone. Fuerstenau is quick to point out that every situation is unique. "We don't need a Maryland or New Jersey solution," he says. "We need a Michigan solution." ♦

—Stover is a writer from Marshall. This is the first in a series covering farmland preservation attempts in Michigan. Future articles will describe how individual communities are fighting this battle.

What it all means

When you ask farmers about commodities, most will talk about crops and livestock. However, farmers in some parts of the country have added development rights to their list of for-sale commodities. Selling development rights allows growers to exercise the equity in their land, but eliminates the need to chop it up into lots for houses and strip malls.

PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

What they are: Farmers sell their Purchase of Development Rights (PDRs) for cash to local entities in order to preserve their land. The price is set based on fair market value.

Why they work: Farmers don't have to worry about financial pressures dictating that they sell their land for development. Communities win because the cost of maintaining farmland is cheaper than providing services to housing and commercial developments.

TRANSFER OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

What they are: Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) address the inequity of current zoning policies by allowing builders to put more houses in a developed area while leaving farmland unscathed. Developers buy the development rights on farmland and use those rights in another area. For example, a farmer in a rural area may sell one unit of rights to a developer who then uses that right to build two houses on a lot concentrated closer to an urban center where only one house was allowed before.

"TDRs are not about stopping growth," says Susan Craft, director of planning for Burlington County, N.J. "It's about rearranging growth in areas where it makes more sense."

Why they work: Farmers receive payment for their development rights and their land stays in production agriculture. Builders can build more units without purchasing additional land. Most important, builders pay for the development rights; no federal, state or local funding is needed. ♦