

Ohio News Watch

Hiram hopes to save farms

By GAIL C. KECK

DEVELOPERS around the village of Hiram say they're willing to pay for the right to increase the density of their developments. Meanwhile, the owners of area farmland are willing to sell development rights from their land.

With willing buyers and willing sellers, community leaders in Hiram are working to set up a Transfer of Development Rights program to bring those buyers and sellers together. Lynne Erickson, director of the Portage County Regional Planning Commission, explained how the planned TDR program could help the community during the recent Ohio Farmland Preservation Summit.

Already five area farms have been preserved through the state's Agricultural Easement Purchase Program, but both farmers and non-farmers in the area want to see more farmland protected, Erickson explained. "We always have more interest in that program than we have funding available."

At the same time, the popula-

Key Points

- Township is drafting plans for transfer of development rights.
- Communities shift development from farmland to other areas.
- TDRs have not yet been used to preserve farmland in Ohio.

tion has been steadily growing in the village and township. Some of the growth is due to out-migration from Cuyahoga County, and some is due to the expansion of Hiram College. As a result developers want to see zoning changes that would allow them to build more homes per acre.

The advantage of a TDR program would be that it could preserve farmland without eliminating development rights, Erickson explained. In comparison, purchase of development rights programs typically eliminate the development rights from the protected land.

"That right is extinguished and put away forever," she noted.

With TDRs, the development rights are separated from the land. It's similar to the way mineral rights are sometimes

separated from land ownership rights. Then the development rights are "sold" to someone who wants more development rights somewhere else.

In the Hiram area, for instance, the number of housing units per acre is limited by zoning. If developers could buy development rights, they could increase the housing density in areas where the local comprehensive plan favors development.

Funding independence

Another advantage to TDR programs is that farmland preservation does not depend on government funding, Erickson added. Instead, the money to buy development rights comes from developers. "The beauty of it is it's private dollars," she explained.

To test the feasibility of a TDR program in Hiram Township, The Ohio State University Center for Farmland Policy Innovation has been working with the regional planning commission and leaders in the community, including elected officials from the village and township, Hiram College officials, the local comprehen-

sive planning group and a local citizen's group.

Comprehensive planning research had already shown that area citizens prefer conservation type development as opposed to development, mainly along rural road frontage, Erickson explained.

The TDR feasibility study indicated that developers would be willing to pay \$6,000 for each "bonus lot" that increased permitted development density. Landowners indicated they'd be willing to sell development rights for \$2,000 to \$4,000 per acre.

Based on the feasibility study, a TDR program in Hiram Township could save 1,000 acres of farmland over the next 20 to 40 years as the area continues to grow in population.

To succeed, TDRs would need to be required for all bonus units, Erickson said. In other words, buying TDRs would need to be the only way to increase housing density. The next step in implementing the proposed TDR program is passing changes in the zoning regulations for the village and township.

Currently, state law does



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not specifically address TDR programs. However, according to Hiram village and township legal advisers, the community can implement a TDR program through zoning legislation. It's a zoning density issue, Erickson explained.

Many communities have already allowed for density changes when developers build planned unit developments, she pointed out. "We look at this as not much different from that."

Communities with no zoning would need to either establish local zoning or wait for changes to state law before they could implement TDR programs.

Keck writes from Marysville.

■ For more on Erickson's presentation and other sessions at the Ohio Farmland Preservation Summit, see cffi.osu.edu/summit08.htm.

