

Open space can be good for the wallet

by Evan Lowenstein

We are rich in proportion to the number of things we can afford to let alone.

-Henry David Thoreau

Cows don't go to school. Apple trees don't need ambulances. **More and more communities are learning that financial security can often be better achieved not through residential, commercial or industrial development, but through the absence of such development.** As municipalities in the Genesee/Finger Lakes Region struggle to balance economic vitality with the preservation of open space, farmland and community character, many find that leaving land undeveloped is a valuable option.

For example, Monroe County, as part of its farmland protection planning process, surveyed several municipalities in New York, Massachusetts and Ohio. The study revealed that housing subdivisions cost an average of \$1.33 in services for every \$1 in tax revenue, as compared with 31 cents in services per dollar for commercial and industrial developments. Similarly, farms, forest and open land cost only 32 cents for service per tax dollar raised. As development chews more deeply into Ontario County, school taxes further demonstrate the savings from open space protection. In the Canandaigua City School District, each student costs local taxpayers about \$4,500 per year. (The rest is paid by the state.) At current tax levels, a new \$175,000 home would fund only one-fourth of a student's education. A new 25-home subdivision would only educate six children. Funds for the seventh student in that new development would have to be raised elsewhere.

Given the reality of these numbers, we must wonder **why so many housing subdivisions sprout on farmland and other open space. The key reason is that much of the land is zoned residential - allowing developers to cheaply and easily build.** The figures above do explain why big-box retail stores sprout throughout our communities. Commercial and industrial development is seen to offset the net tax loss from residential development. But as long as so much land in a community is zoned residential, and as long as industrial and commercial development creates desired jobs, more homes invariably accompany it.

This cycle has resulted in sad stories all over America - communities losing their economic viability along with their land and their character, because they try to develop their way out of development-related economic problems. Onondaga County looked at tax rates and farm trends over 20 years in its towns of Fabius and Manlius. During the study period, Fabius lost 47 percent of its farms and Manlius lost 75 percent. In these two towns, property taxes per acre increased 39 percent and 146 percent respectively between 1984 and 1996. The study also revealed another vicious cycle: Remaining farms were further stressed by the higher tax rates associated with the loss of other farms. The

Onondaga study also examined a 100-acre farm to learn whether keeping the land in agriculture or developing it into 5-acre lots with \$150,000 houses would better benefit the county fiscally. ***It was determined that the homes would require \$33,000 more annually in services than they would generate in tax revenue. The farm, however, would generate a modest but positive \$2,400 surplus per year.***

In short, many studies conclude that taxpayers would be better off if they were to support - even financially - the protection of open space and farmland.

Pittsford put this idea into action after a study revealed that preserving 1,200 acres of farms and open space rather than developing them into single-family homes would save each of the town's homeowners \$200 per year. This "Greenprint" plan required \$9.9 million in bonds to preserve the land by purchasing development rights, but this translated into only \$50 per year per homeowner over the 25-year bond period. In other words, open space means a \$5,000 tax savings per Pittsford homeowner over 25 years.

This research counters the "develop or die" premise that underlies much rural community planning. It also begs serious consideration of cooperative inter-municipal and regional planning (to include revenue sharing), so that rural communities can have options other than land development to generate revenue needed for schools, infrastructure and services.

"Vacant" land, or the "nothing" that people drive past on their way to "something," is most likely quietly generating positive fiscal impact for its government. As we size up our options for economic health in our communities, we owe it to ourselves to think to something other than size. Open space and farmland is attractive to the eye - and can be pretty attractive to the community wallet as well.

Evan Lowenstein is a member of the Common Good Planning Center's Leadership Council. The center works in the nine-county Genesee-Finger Lakes Region to build interest, knowledge and participation in community planning; to promote development that enhances economy, ecology and equity; and to promote intermunicipal and regional cooperation. Phone: (585) 442-2730. Web site: www.cgpc.org.