

AGENDA PRIORITIES

7. Review and seek appropriate revisions to state and local land use policies to preserve farmland and blend protection with farm viability programs.

FARMERS INVEST WHEN NEIGHBORS VALUE THEIR LAND, BUSINESSES

Ken and Jan Engle are slowly easing themselves out of their longtime jobs as farmers.

For 40 years, they've been raising children, cherries, and corn on some 300 acres of land near Williamsburg, in Acme Township, east of Traverse City. So why did Ken and Jan, now in their 60s, recently invest in planting an entirely new cherry orchard? After all, it takes about 10 years for a cherry tree to start really producing for a farmer.

"I don't know who will end up farming that orchard," Ken said. "Maybe one of our workers, maybe one of our kids ... All I know is it wouldn't have happened if this land wasn't protected."



Photo courtesy of Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy

Ken is talking about how he and Jan are putting money they have gained through the township's farmland protection program back into their land, which includes one of the best sites for growing cherries in that part of Grand Traverse County.

Even though they are retiring, the Engles are now confident about investing in their farm, no matter who ends up harvesting those cherry trees. They believe the orchard will continue because the township's program is also helping to preserve farm property all around theirs, keeping a local economy, community, and way of life intact.

Nels Veliquette, with the Shoreline Fruit company, explains that Acme Township's success comes from connecting farmland protection and farm business support.

"This township has done a great job in terms of working with local farms on economic and business issues, too."

The combination has the township, working with the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, on course to keep some 1,400 acres in business, as "working lands" available for agriculture now and in the future.

Opportunity

The incredible power of farming to bring Michigan into 21st century prosperity is clear when one looks at the full spectrum of value farmland and farm businesses together offer Michigan's economic, environmental, and social well being.

Michigan farmland offers residents and visitors beautiful views and access to nature and recreation. It provides habitat for wildlife. Farmland stewardship keeps waterways clean and soil fertile. Michigan's farmland produces some of the greatest variety of foods in the nation.

The state's fruits and vegetables are among the most flavorful, too. Michigan's moist climate makes the fruits and vegetables its farmers raise more delicate than most produce, which moves through thousands of miles of distribution. But Michigan's produce is also famed for its excellent taste because of this climate.

Taking care of Michigan's farmland and its farmers builds opportunity for everyone through the quality of life, local commerce, and environmental assets farmland and farmers provide. Potential growth in food and agriculture will depend on Michigan's ability to protect farmland from development and make it affordable to farmers, while supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in agriculture.

Need

The Michigan Good Food Charter recommends that local and state leaders take steps to develop land use policies that conserve farmland and to combine land use policy with farm business development efforts. Acme Township in Antrim County, where Ken and Jan Engle live, is a good example of the vision, planning, and follow through that can make a real long-term difference.

Action

Specific actions the charter recommends include:

- *Introduce legislation that incentivizes households to pay taxes owed after removing land protected under Public Act 116 from agriculture. Legislation could provide discounts on repayment. The state could apply the money to farmland preservation.*
- *Amend state law to enable local governments to levy real estate transfer taxes. The tax could support programs to improve options for farmland owners.*
- *Target farmland preservation efforts at land that is most vulnerable to development, such as in urban-edge counties, and where local government and partner organizations are investing in farm business viability.*

1-2-3 Go!

Many of Michigan's newer farmers do not come from farm families with land and many farm families do not have a next generation willing to take on the land or the business. Communities across the country have started building farmland succession bridges by just introducing these two groups.

Some have held community potlucks and coffee klatches featuring new farmers meeting older farmers, and presenting their business ideas. Who knows what kind of spark might happen between generations! Try this at home, and invite local government and economic development people, too, so they start getting the picture, and getting involved.



Photo by Dean Connors