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Shelby farmers plant seeds for program to save land

Increasing development of county prompts efforts

By Michael A. Lindenberg
 mlindenberg@courier-journal.com
 The Courier-Journal

SHELBYVILLE, Ky. -- When the 300-acre farm next door was carved into lots for houses, farmers Susan and Doug Schlosnagle did the only thing they could think of to hold off the encroaching suburbs.

They paid nearly \$400,000 to buy 11 lots covering 70 acres between their farm and the highway.

"We would have had 10 driveways coming onto the road leading from our farm to Highway 43," said Susan Schlosnagle, who has cattle, more than 1,000 free-range laying hens and may plant an orchard on the new 70 acres. "It would have changed everything."

The loss of the rest of the farm to homes has contributed to a debate about the future of Shelby County, with some advocating wholesale preservation of farmland, and others warning that such a move could increase the cost of housing.

The Schlosnagles and other Shelby County farmers and activists want to create a program that would pay farmers to preserve their land forever for agriculture. Their goal is to remove the temptation for farmers to sell to developers.

Fayette County is the only Kentucky county now with



Doug Aldridge adjusted a for-sale sign for a house and five acres he is offering next to Susan and Doug Schlosnagle's farm in Shelby County. The Schlosnagles bought 11 lots covering 70 acres to buffer their land from development. (BY MICHAEL HAYMAN, THE COURIER-JOURNAL)



Chelsey Schlosnagle gathered eggs from

such a program.

The state runs a similar program, but it has a waiting list of 587 applicants statewide, and Shelby County farmers say action is needed now.

"We feel there are enough farmers and city residents here who want to preserve the county's farmland," said Jim Ellis, president of the local conservation group called Maintain Our Rural Environment.

But Mike Meinze, the developer who bought the farm next to the Schlosnagles and sold them their 11 lots, said he is concerned it could drive prices up for those seeking to buy new homes in the county.

"It's important to have open spaces, and it's important to have farmland," he said. "But at the same time, there are more people this year in the world, and in this area, than there were the year before. And all of those people need a place to live."

Shelby County real estate agent Doug Aldridge said the county needs to recognize its role in providing area housing.

"Jefferson County and Oldham County are filling up, and people need to go somewhere," Aldridge said. "And Shelby County is located right between Louisville and Lexington and Frankfort, and it's going to be a natural choice for people."

Former Kentucky first lady Libby Jones, who has been on the board of the state program since it was begun during her husband's administration, said the goal is not to discourage development.

"We are just trying to channel development into areas where it can be served cost-effectively," she said.

Pressures mount

Farmland is often referred to as a "farmer's 401k."

The temptation for farmers to sell to developers has increased in recent years, apace with demand for homes in Shelby County.

Since 1999, more than 2,100 single-family housing permits have been issued, as the population rose from 24,842 in 1990 to an estimated 37,219 in 2004.

some of the 1,000 free-range laying hens on her parents' farm in Shelby County. The Schlosnagles and other Shelby County farmers and activists want to create a program that would pay farmers to preserve their land forever for agriculture. (PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HAYMAN, THE COURIER-JOURNAL)



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To help preserve farmland, the state launched the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement program in 1994 to buy development rights from farmers.

Farmers retain ownership of their land and the rights to sell it or give it to heirs. But in return for a payment, they agree to limit the land to agricultural uses forever, a restriction that would run with the deed and bind future owners as well.

The program's popularity has outstripped its resources.

The waiting list has 587 applications, representing 115,000 acres, with an estimated value of over \$100 million, said Brent Frazier, one of the program managers for the state.

But the state only has about \$800,000 to spend each year, half of which comes in federal funds.

Since 1994, the state has spent \$15.5 million buying development rights to 78 farms totaling 17,351 acres, Frazier said.

More than 30 landowners in Shelby County have applied, and 11 more have received payments, he said.

Shelby County farmers David and Susan Neville were among the first to take part, selling development rights for acreage in Shelby and Henry counties for about \$850 an acre.

Neville said he could have made more money selling to developers, noting that his property is worth about \$5,000 or more per acre, but he doesn't regret his choice.

"I rather hope 100 years now someone will drive by, see black angus cattle grazing on my farm, and say to themselves, 'I don't know who did that, but I am glad they saved that farm,'" David Neville said.

Shelby County plan

Frazier said the group forming in Shelby County would be able to apply directly to the U.S. government for matching grants, though he said the state would likely also match some of the funds.

A local program, he said, would be controlled by local people -- with money spent only on preserving local farms.

Supporters want to buy development rights to about 600 to 700 acres a year, which Schlosnagle said equals the amount of prime agricultural land converted to housing each year.

To do that, Schlosnagle said, they would need about \$500,000 a year in local money.

"That's a lot of money to me, but it's not impossible," he said.

Growth carries a burden

Elected officials in Shelby County are considering whether to endorse a local program.

Shelby County Judge-Executive Rob Rothenburger said if Maintain Our Rural Environment or another local group takes the lead, the magistrates would try to contribute as many tax dollars as possible.

He said the issue hasn't come to a vote, but said the county will not likely agree to be the primary source of funds.

Rothenburger said residential growth can be good, and a 1,300-lot subdivision in Simpsonville was just approved, for example.

But he said it's critical to channel growth into areas near existing populations centers, such as Shelbyville and Simpsonville, because services exist there. Large-scale home development in rural areas could require the county to build utilities, roads, schools and other services, he said.

"The growth is starting to place a burden on our services, and people in Shelby County are very used to have a high level of service," he said.

Rothenburger and Jones said a local program would help manage that growth.

Some unsure

Marty Page of Finchville, who owns a hardware and feed store along U.S. 60 in Simpsonville, said he's seeing more traffic on the roads and more students in the schools his children attend. "I don't mind growth, but it needs to be controlled growth," he said.

Herb Fallis, 71, another Shelby County farmer who supports starting a local program, said he likes that farmers are taking a stand in favor of farming.

But he admitted he has been having second thoughts about selling the development rights.

His application for the state program is in but not yet approved. "Down the road, I plan to leave my farm to my family. And I've been thinking that they could want to do something besides farming, and I don't want to leave them in a bind."

So far though, he said, his children support keeping the 212 acres the family owns as a farm.

"One of these days we may wake up and there will not be much farmland left in Shelby County, not good farming land anyway," he said.

[^^ Back to top](#)

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