

Voters Still Strong on Land Conservation

In November's elections, voters approved \$365 million in state and local ballot measures that included funding for farm and ranch land protection, according to The Trust for Public Land (TPL). Of the 41 farm and ranch land proposals nationwide, 27 (or 66 percent) passed. Although that number is down from 2000, when voters approved 89 percent of the 47 incentive-based initiatives proposed, it still demonstrates continued, strong support for land conservation during uncertain economic times.

"Generally, measures with farmland have been more successful" than the average of all land conservation measures says TPL conservation finance director Ernest Cook, based on a review of TPL's LandVote database. "Typically, about 75 percent of measures are approved. Farmland consistently ranked above that until 2003, when it fell to about average."

No doubt the economic climate is much changed from November 2000. "The dotcom implosion was just starting to have an impact. 9/11 hadn't occurred. We weren't at war," observes Bob Wagner, AFT's senior associate for farmland protection. Additionally, many nonprofits and advocacy groups have been forced to scale back and don't have the organizational capacity they did four years ago. "There's been a substantial change in many of the organizations that historically have pushed for passage of these initiatives," says Wagner.

But Wagner, Cook and other observers caution against drawing quick conclusions about the impact of national trends from the numbers. Early analysis of November's elections suggests local factors play at least as important a role as national influences in determining results. In Michigan, for example, five out of seven proposals that included farmland protection failed. "If Michigan had experienced a more typical outcome, it would have been five of seven measures succeeding," says Cook. "Then the national statistics [for measures including farmland] would have been consistent with other types of open space measures." In New Jersey, voter support was stronger for measures that included farmland than other land conservation measures, according to TPL data.

"There's a lot of variation in the number of ballot measures from election year to election year, and I think the passage rate was still strong," says David Goldberg, communications director for Smart Growth America. On a percentage basis, county proposals were most successful in November's election with three out of four passing. About two-thirds of the 32 municipal measures including farmland passed, and one of November's two statewide ballot measures including farmland protection was successful. "My sense is the low-

hanging fruit has been picked,” Goldberg says, referring to proposals where broad community support existed. “Now, the case that has to be made is more complex.”

Voters’ familiarity with agricultural conservation programs appears to have made a difference in November. In places where agricultural land conservation programs have a proven track record, voters strongly supported established programs and provided funding for new ones. Seventy-one percent of Rhode Island voters approved a \$59 million statewide measure that includes farmland protection funding, adding to the statewide bond voters approved in 2000. As a result, Rhode Island will have \$8 million in state funds available for farmland protection over the next five years that will leverage additional funds when matched with local and federal dollars, says Ken Ayars, chief of the Rhode Island Division of Agriculture.

Similarly, in Montana, a \$10 million bond to continue Gallatin County’s Open Space program passed easily with about 63 percent of the vote. The Open Space Program, which protects agricultural land, scenic open space, wildlife habitat and river corridors, was launched with a \$10 million bond in 2000. Local officials say the program has leveraged more than \$4 in matching funds (including federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program funds and private donations) for every \$1 committed in bond money. “People are appreciating that we’re accountable and responsible with their money,” Jeff Krauss, co-chair of the Vote Yes for Open Space campaign, told the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* after the election.

Across the country, voter support for local initiatives was generally strong in places where it leveraged additional state or federal funding. The states with the most local conservation measures on the ballot—Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Michigan--were those offering matching funds to local governments, according to TPL.

In Massachusetts, voters approved 11 out of 11 municipal ballot measures, representing some \$43 million in land conservation funding. Ten of these ballot measures were proposals to adopt a 1–3 percent property tax surcharge under Massachusetts’ Community Preservation Act (CPA). In several of these communities the CPA funding will provide local matching funds necessary to participate in Massachusetts’ statewide purchase of development rights program. Most notable of these was Hadley, where the ballot measure was approved handily with 64 percent of the vote.

Similarly, New Jersey voters approved 17 out of 21 county, borough and township ballot items that included funding for farmland protection, for a total of \$238.3 million, according to TPL. One of the single biggest ballot items was in Hunterdon County, where 76 percent of voters approved a \$105 million ballot measure to continue funding for purchasing development rights on farmland, conserving open space and preserving historic buildings.

In several areas of the country, high profile initiatives were defeated. Among them a \$250-million ballot measure in Ventura County, California, which has a reputation for anti-sprawl sentiment. The 10-year, 0.25 percent sales tax increase for open space, parks

and farmland protection would have funded both fee simple acquisitions and purchase of development rights. It received 49 percent of the vote, far short of the two-thirds majority it needed to pass.

Local officials who supported the measure interpreted election results as a reflection of voter wariness about raising taxes and a crowded ballot. In addition, Ventura voters rejected a half-cent sales tax for transportation improvements by an even greater margin, with almost 60 percent voting against it. “It was a case of voter fatigue but it still showed that voters support open space and there is a trend toward protection of open space and agricultural land in Ventura County,” Thousand Oaks Mayor Pro Tem Claudia Bill-de la Peñ said.

“There may be a tipping point where the community needs to achieve a certain level of non-farm citizenry and enough development to tip the scales,” AFT’s Wagner says. “If a community that’s primarily agricultural wants to get out in front of this issue, it has a harder time passing a tax increase because even a modest increase may be something people living on agricultural incomes feel they can’t afford.”

In places where agricultural conservation programs are not yet established, educating — and convincing — a majority of voters to support tax increases is always challenging. Generally, campaigns in support of ballot initiatives have limited funding and rely on media coverage to get the message out. “Merely having it on the ballot an initial time becomes one of the best ways to raise awareness and get in front of people,” says Smart Growth’s Goldberg. “That’s why it sometimes takes successive tries” to pass.

November’s unusually high voter turnout, and early voting via absentee ballot, made it even more difficult in Northwestern Michigan, where organizers in five adjacent townships attempted to establish a purchase of development rights program through a 1 mill increase in the property tax.

Voters in four out of five townships rejected the proposal. Only Acme Township in Grand Traverse County, where development pressure is the strongest, approved the measure. However in two of the others, Whitewater and Elk Rapids, the measure lost by within 75 votes, and organizers are considering placing it on the ballot again. “The passage in Acme was a real plus,” says Dorance Amos, a farmer and supporter of the plan, told the *Town Meeting* newspaper. “But those residents were motivated by what they see happening in their township — which is rapid development closing in on the open space.”

Scott Everett, AFT’s Michigan state director attributed results in part to high voter turnout — approximately 82 percent of the electorate in those five townships voted in the election — with almost 35 percent of using absentee ballots in advance of Election Day. “We never expected absentee ballot voters to be more than triple what they normally are,” he said, explaining that the campaign strategy focused on reaching voters close to election day. “Absentee voters only got one direct mailing specific to them because traditionally they are only 10 percent of the vote. All others got four direct mailers.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to do your best and lose to find out what you need for next time,” Everett says. “Communities all over Michigan say ‘we’re not ready yet’; we’ve got to do more education. I think you need to be serious enough to say we have a 10-year timeline, we’re going to run this ballot proposal, and see what happens, but we’re not giving up.”

It’s not uncommon for it to take several tries for agricultural land protection measures to succeed. “It seems like New Jersey communities pass these measures with ease each year,” observes Wagner. “But I’m certain that when the first ones tested the waters years ago the results were just as mixed. It took a few to get it started, to establish the standard and the model for the others to feel comfortable and envious.”

The Trust For Public Land's LandVote Database (www.tpl.org) is an invaluable source of information about public funds raised to support land conservation. The database brings together data on all conservation-related ballot measures that have been voted on since 1999. The information about each ballot measure in the LandVote Database includes the state and jurisdiction, the date of the election, a description of the measure, total funds committed (and where available, the amount of money dedicated specifically for land acquisition, restoration and protection) and election results. Users may query the database based on each of these fields or in combination.